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### Susan Palwick Recapitulating Phylogeny

A Roundabout Review of *In the Chinks of the World Machine: Feminism and Science Fiction* by Sarah Lefanu

London: The Women's Press, 1988; £5.95; 231 pp.

At Norwescon in 1986, I had a conversation about Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* with a Clarion classmate who is about my mother's age and whose husband, some time before I met her and after many years of traditional marriage, had run off with the stereotypical younger career woman. I had enjoyed Atwood's book, but although I considered myself a feminist in the loose way in which one uses the term when advocating equal pay for equal work, Atwood's vision of the future seemed exaggerated to me. After all, we were in the post-feminist era, weren't we? Such things could never happen. Unable to believe the book on a literal level, I'd read it on a metaphorical one.

When I expressed these opinions, with utter lack of tact and a naïveté I now find profoundly embarrassing, my classmate gave me a scolding look equally composed of pity, anger and disgust, and said, "You have a lot to learn."

She was right. When I made those comments I hadn't yet encountered blatant sexism on the job, and hadn't learned to recognize the more subtle forms I'd seen—or rather, when I recognized them, I didn't understand that they were symptoms of sweeping cultural distortions rather than individual idiosyncrasy. The fellow I'd briefly dated who airily assured me that he considered birth control "the woman's responsibility" was obviously a jerk, but surely he was also an anomaly. The high school social studies teacher who'd asked me for a kiss on the last day of school was a slimebag, but my other teachers were nice. The college professor who, upon hearing that I wanted to write science fiction, gravely advised me to "find a nice husband" to support me was condescending, but he meant well—and anyway, he was old, part of the pre-feminist generation, and couldn't be blamed for his mental blinders.

Since that conversation at Norwescon, I've become much more attuned to the forces which work to keep women powerless in this society. The controversy about Roe versus Wade has helped; so has sitting in a high-level corporate meeting and trying to express my opinion to the expensive consultant sitting across from me, only to watch him turn to the expensive vice president next to him and begin talking about something else while I was in the middle of a sentence. But what's helped most of all is the recognition of how powerless I felt, and still feel, in situations such as the ones I've described.

Even now, my reaction to the college professor's comment would probably be useful amusement—but, more tellingly, I didn't castigate the date, report the high school teacher to the appropriate authorities, or demand the right to be heard in the conference room. Nor, probably, would the men in those three situations have behaved the way they did had they thought there was any chance of my doing so.

As far as I can remember, my conscious thoughts about those three events when they happened was, "Well, that's really annoying,

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### In this issue

Susan Palwick "only" recapitulates phylogeny  
Patrick Murphy looks at Joanna Russ's writings and the discussion they've engendered  
Kathryn Cramer shades her eyes from *Full Spectrum 2*  
Jessica Amanda Salmonson takes a bumpy ride on *The Ship Who Sang*  
Greg Cox tangles with Scott Baker's *Webs*  
As well as feminists, masculinists, freaks, and many, many more words

### Patrick D. Murphy "Gender Politics": Epithet or Accolade?

Or, Feminist SF and the Case of Joanna Russ

For years largely a boys' club—or as one male critic (Charles Platt, "Profile: Joanna RUSS") put it, stories written by men for boys, science fiction has been infiltrated since the early 1970s by an increasing number of women writers and critics, many of them feminists. At the same time, a number of male writers and critics have, if not become feminists, at least shown clear signs of empathy toward and interest in feminist themes and critical methods. Both in terms of the themes of a number of creative works and the ideology of much criticism, the label "gender politics" has been applied as both epithet and accolade. If the granting of the Pilgrim Award to Joanna Russ last year by the SFRA and the recent publication of numerous full-length works on women's speculative fiction, such as those by Barr, Rosinsky, Shinn, Spivack, and others, are any indication, then the "gender politics" that has already appeared in fiction has arrived in the world of science fiction and fantastic criticism.

Presuming that criticism interacts with as well as responds to trends in the writing it critiques, then one can expect development and expansion of feminist fantastic literature and criticism. The creative and critical writings of Joanna Russ serve as a case in point to demonstrate the necessary, healthy, and vitally decentering role of feminist theory, criticism and fiction for the present and for the future of science fiction and fantasy literature.

In one sense, gender politics has arrived in science fiction because authors and critics are self-consciously writing about it, pointing it out, defining it, and analyzing its implications, variations, and structural formations. In another sense, gender politics has always already been woven into the fabric of science fiction—as it has been into all of literature. Only, no one noticed. It remained invisible. But unlike some women, gender politics could not remain in the wings, understood but not expressed, because any portrayal of sexually-typed beings includes gender politics. Any portrayal of sexual differences must treat

(Continued on page 3)

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the cultural hierarchies that arise from such physical differences or the ways in which the potential for hierarchical differences is obviated. And, certainly, any depiction of such relations establishes either an implicit or explicit comparison with human beings, who are sexually and hierarchically differentiated. A sad example of this is John Brunner's *The Crucible of Time*, in which the alien creatures discover that they have two species, not two genders. Yet, throughout the novel, it is the alien creatures that thought of themselves as the male gender, that are designated with male personal pronouns, and reflect masculinist attitudes in various patriarchal societies, who dominate every facet of the story.

Now, the reason that gender politics was not noticed, for the most part, prior to the late 1960s in science fiction is really quite simple: there was only one kind, masculinist, patriarchal gender politics. The one real variation was that between masculinist and misogynist, with the line often blurring. As a case in point, James Gunn has recently published the article "A Basic Science Fiction Library" in *Library Journal*, in which he lists an alleged "100 must-reads." He lists six male turn-of-the-century writers, including racists and misogynists, but no women, as if they either were not writing or else were unimportant. Yet I think a survey of college campuses would find that more people are reading *Herland* than *She* and there can be no doubt that the writings of Charlotte Perkins Gilman are more culturally significant than those of M. P. Shiel. Gunn's list itself is an example of "gender politics," and also an example that suggests we have a very curious situation on our hands. Science fiction, that supposedly extrapolative, innovative literature that allows writers to express new perceptions, insights, and possibilities not available to them in mainstream forms—at least that is what Russ believed in 1971 (see "The Wearing Out of Genre Materials," p. 54)—has become, at least in the tower of its criticism, a bastion of outdated paradigms and perspectives. Feminist and other allied critical perspectives may have invaded the courtyard, but patriarchal ideology is still manning the keep.

But enough of medieval metaphors. Let's get down to cases, specifically the case of Joanna Russ. I think that Russ has posed a

tremendous problem for the masculinist critics in science fiction for three reasons. One, she writes so well, forcing them to make remarks that split their aesthetic sensibilities from their ideological prejudices. Last summer, when a well-known SF and fantasy reviewer caught me reading *The Two of Them* and *We Who Are About to . . .* at Mythcon, he remarked that they were beautifully written, but of course "all politics." The truth is, they are beautifully written but they contain, for him, not "politics" but the wrong politics.

Two, Russ not only continues to win or be nominated for awards for her fiction, but she continues to use that beautiful, impressive writing to hammer home the same points, but each time in a very different kind of novel, novella or short story, so that she can't be conveniently accused of repeating herself. But then, some critics have taken to viewing such nominations and awards as a "conspiracy." As one famous SF bibliographer and critic remarked immediately after the announcement of the Pilgrim Award last year at SFRA, "It's all gender politics," and hence the inspiration and title for this essay. At first I thought he meant the writings of Russ, but then I realized he meant the very selection and presentation of the award. Of course, Neil Barron has gone public with this position by declaring the awarding of the prize to Russ "sexism at its most regrettable." Funny that when a Russian critic was previously presented with a belated award and speeches were made clearly extolling the virtues of American critical freedom versus Soviet censorship, this was not dismissed as all "bourgeois politics." Again, the issue is not politics, but what kind.

Three, Russ won't limit herself just to writing fiction, but insists on being a critic as well, continuing with her publications in academic journals and magazines throughout her career. In fact, her nonfictional *How to Suppress Women's Writing* has had greater success in remaining in print than has most of her fiction. It is a book that the dismissive, masculinist critics most need to read. In her Prologue, Russ coins the word *gialogy*, intergalactic slang for "information control

'Neil Barron, "Whose Sexist Blindness?", *SFRA Newsletter* no. 161, October, 1988, p. 34.

## The New York Review of Science Fiction

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without direct censorship", precisely the situation we are confronted with in far too much of criticism. As Russ pointedly observes:

In a nominally egalitarian society the ideal situation (socially speaking) is one in which the members of the "wrong" groups have the freedom to engage in literature (or equally significant activities) and yet do not do so, thus proving that they can't. But, alas, give them the least real freedom and they will do it. The trick thus becomes to make the freedom as nominal a freedom as possible and then—since some of the so-and-so's will do it anyway—develop various strategies for ignoring, condemning, or belittling the artistic works that result. If properly done, these strategies result in a social situation in which the "wrong" people are (supposedly) free to commit literature, art, or whatever, but very few do, and those who do (it seems) do it badly, so we can all go home to lunch. (p. 5).

If anyone is not clear on the implications and applicability of Russ's comments for sf criticism in general, I refer them to the pseudo-documentary episode to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Again, I turn to Neil Barron's public pronouncements, in which he attacks a feminist bibliography of women of writers and unfavorably compares it with Curtis Smith's *Twentieth-Century Science-Fiction Writers*, pointing out that of the 600 plus entries, 73 of them are female; the irony is that Barron doesn't notice how skewed the ratio is here: 73 out of 600. No sexism, no gender politics in sf until the feminists arrived?

Let me turn briefly again to James Gunn's "must-read" list. More than a hundred writers are listed, yet one finds only about a dozen women and two of them are sublated under their husbands as secondary collaborators. While ignoring the political ideologies of almost every other author on the list, such as Huxley and Wells, Gunn singles out feminist politics for criticism. In the entry for Vonda McIntyre, he says of *Dreamsnake*: "It is feminist but not polemical, like McIntyre's *Superfeminist*." "Polemical," is, of course, a pejorative term, and is used only twice in the entire survey: once for McIntyre and once for Russ. Do none of these other works contains polemics? Or is it that Gunn either finds agreeable or acceptable, since nonthreatening, the other polemics that appear? But note the way Gunn's sentence on *Dreamsnake* suggests that the work is good, even though feminist, and *Superfeminist* is not even good because it is polemical.

Even more interesting is the entry for Russ: *The Female Man*, 1977, marked Russ's transition from a writer of sensitive, skillful, feminist sf such as *Picnic on Paradise*, 1968, and *And Chaos Died*, 1970, to the polemicist for feminist perspectives.<sup>3</sup> Oh terror! What rough beast is slouching towards Kansas waiting to be born? While Gunn mentions 36 times authors who received or were nominated for awards, he omits that Russ has won the Nebula and the Hugo and received nominations in other years. Further, he makes no mention of works written after 1977—apparently he has not bothered to keep up with such writing as "Souls," which won Russ the Hugo, *The Science Fiction Chronicle* and *Locust* readers' poll for best novella awards in 1983. Gunn's selective omissions and singling out for political criticism of Russ are obvious, blatant, and sad examples of gender politics; sad because they demonstrate very well the accuracy of Russ's explanation of "glotology": ignore as much as you can, dismiss what you can't, and try to praise women writers only when and in terms of the ways their writing is indistinguishable from men's writing, i.e., the ways in which their writing reflects masculinist and patriarchal interpellation (I use Louis Althusser's term for the way a dominant society's ideology constructs the consciousness of individual subjects).

Gunn also found himself in the awkward position of including, while at the same time attempting to criticize, Russ in *The Road to Science Fiction* #3. There he suggests in good "glotology" that there are two ways to address political and social issues in sf: one, the oblique approach; two, the direct confrontation approach. Gunn claims that:

The most explosive issue in contemporary science fiction has been women's liberation. Some writers have dealt with it in the older, more oblique fashion, as Ursula K. Le Guin did in

*The Left Hand of Darkness*. But such subtlety often is scorned as cowardly, and current science fiction confronts such issues more directly.<sup>4</sup>

Here Gunn establishes himself as a defender of Le Guin from the scorn and slander of extremists. But what of Russ, whose story "When It Changed" he is introducing? Perhaps the most vigorous attacks on male dominance have come from Joanna Russ," he says. Is this good or bad? Well, Gunn has established clear parallels in this introduction between sf critics of racism and McCarthyism and critiques of "women's oppression." The overall suggestion here is that social criticism is good but subtlety is superior to blatancy, being oblique to being confrontational, subordinating message to story, theme to plot.

As Craig and Diana Barrow point out in "Feminism for Men," Le Guin wrote *The Left Hand of Darkness* with the clear recognition that the main audience for sf at that time consisted of men: "Le Guin posits typically biased heterosexual males as her main audience. Just as King sought to convert whites to the cause of racial equality, so Le Guin is arguing for sexual equality but with male fans and science-fiction writers." Le Guin speaks to Gunn; he feels a part of the anticipated audience for the work. And, if so, then that is probably precisely what he finds so disconcerting about all of Russ's work after *And Chaos Died*, because at that point Russ started writing not only about women but increasingly for and to women in her novels (she had already been doing this in many of her short stories). Perhaps this also explains the critical neglect of Le Guin's poetry, which is predominantly written about and often to women, and some men's complaints about *Always Coming Home*. Terry Lovell argues in *Consuming Fiction* that "it is not so much the sex of the author which secures the exclusion of a text in the process of cultural capitalist accumulation as the address of the text. It is woman-to-woman writing which is excluded."<sup>5</sup>

As Samuel Delany argues, *And Chaos Died* was the last novel by Russ in which she was still trapped in that anticipated audience and cultural norm mindset of "typically biased heterosexual males," and one should add, predominantly "white" males as well. In a lengthy article, published in 1985, long after Russ had become a "polemicist," Delany noted that "Joanna Russ's science fiction creates a peculiar embarrassment for anyone approaching our particular practice of writing with broadly critical intent."<sup>6</sup> Why? First, because she is recognized as a "touchstone" by major Anglo-American sf writers; second, because her works give readers "great pleasure and others great distress." And, according to Delany, "what in her works creates such intense pleasure, what creates such intense distress, most critics of science fiction are unprepared to deal with." The key reason for the very real "distress" that Delany cites is not blatancy or polemics, but rather after *And Chaos Died*, Russ stopped writing to and for the traditional normative audience and focused increasingly on woman-to-woman writing instead.

As Rebecca Bell-Metereau, Teresa de Laurentis, and others have pointed out in regard to film, women are used to this problem of gendered audiences, used to having to identify with the male characters and distance themselves from the female characters in order to imagine themselves winners, in order to imagine that the film, or the novel, is directed to them rather than to their brother. This is precisely the point that Russ makes in "What Can a Heroine Do?", as well as elsewhere. And in "Somebody's Trying to Kill Me," Russ demonstrates that the modern gothic tries to convince women not to identify with the winning males but with the losing females. The authors and audience for such novels may be women, but the guiding ideology is patriarchal, encouraging women to identify females with passive, subordinate losses, and males with active, dominating winners. Masculinists don't like the reality of gendered audiences pointed out.

<sup>3</sup>James Gunn, "Issues and Controversies," in *The Road to Science Fiction* #3: From Heinlein to Here. Ed. by James Gunn, New York: New American Library, 1979. p. 576.

<sup>4</sup>Terry Lovell, *Consuming Fiction*, London: Verso, 1987, p. 160.

<sup>5</sup>Samuel R. Delany, "Orders of Chaos: The Science Fiction of Joanna Russ," in *Women Worldwalkers: New Dimensions of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, ed. by Jane B. Weedman, Lubbock: Texas Tech Press, 1985, p. 95.

They're the ones who will arrogantly and dismissively remark that, of course, the words "man" and "mankind" include woman. The irking conclusion that Russ reached from such remarks provides the title for *The Female Man*. And in Muriel Rukeyser's poem "Myth," when Oedipus tries to pass this line off on the Sphinx, she replies, "That's what you think."

That sentence, "that's what you think," brings one back to the issue of Russ's contributions to sf, her qualifications for receiving the Pilgrim Award, her merits for being considered a "touchstone" by other well-respected writers, the reasons for her winning and being nominated for a variety of awards, and the reasons for her continuing to be read and reprinted, and even more important, being debated. Russ makes the reader think, and omissions and dismissals to the contrary, she even succeeds in making her most virulent opponents and detractors think at least once in a while; else why such impassioned responses? As a feminist, Russ has not only brought polemics to sf, which she does very well, but also brought innovation, renewal, and substantive content. In virtually every case, her novels, and frequently her stories, have invented and innovated the genre materials of the sf mode.

The real problem with Russ for masculinists is that she is a woman who hasn't learned when to "shut up." And giving her awards just encourages her to continue mouthing off. Worse yet, she keeps mouthing off about the same thing: the oppression of women, patriarchy, masculinist values, and doing it in some of the most stylistically innovative and wittily written sf to come down the pike in the past two decades. As Jeffrey Berman has remarked, "part of her achievement as a writer is that she preserves the value of storytelling in her fiction: she cannot and will not imagine a world without art."<sup>5</sup> And she cannot and will not imagine an art that is merely entertainment, merely sublimation, providing the kind of fast reading and quick catharsis in much of that parallels the all-too-frequent male approach to orgasm: in, bang, out, and go get a beer. Rather, Russ provides "dangerous visions" again and again, and as Le Guin notes in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, sf is a type of thought experiment and its function "is not to predict the future . . . but to describe reality, the present world."

Gender politics could only be extrinsic to sf, inappropriately introduced to sf criticism, if the genre did not describe reality. But obviously, all sf works contain configurations of gender differences, which form part of the cultural context of any story. If these configurations, however, conform to the dominant ideology, critics frequently fail to notice them. As James Gunn has recognized, the oppression of women is part of our reality. Yet many people will not admit there is gender oppression. Or else, they admit its existence but deny its significance. Such people believe that only others have ideologies; they do not want to recognize that they have an ideology as well, that they are interpellated by a set of values that construct their subject position and concept of self, and, worst of all, that they may very well benefit from the oppression of others who are not enjoying it. Hey, too bad. Such people would also like to believe that language is a transparent medium, that style does not carry with it valorizations and world views, that forms and themes can be separated out in some way, and that rationality and logic are neutral rather than partisan, that the experimenter does not influence the experiment. Russ continuously and distressingly reminds them of the contrary.

Barbara Johnson, in a completely different context, presents a parallel to what I see as a part of the struggle between Joanna Russ and an "old guard" of founding figures who would dismiss or denigrate her. Johnson speaks of her experience as a female student and novice critic under the mentorship of Paul de Man at Yale, and questions the ways in which he manipulated language to present his ideas as being universal rather than particular, and observes that "it would seem that one has to be positioned in the place of power in order for one's self-resistance to be valued. . . . One has to be positioned in the place of power" to claim universality for one's own gender politics.<sup>6</sup> Those in such places can claim to be non-sexist and attack chauvinists as sexist when that judgment protects their privilege and power. But if such individuals believe that so to write a veneer will maintain the patriarchal status quo, I can only quote to them the words of the Sphinx, "That's what you think."

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**Webs by Scott Baker**  
New York: Tor, 1989; \$3.95 pb; 310 pp.  
reviewed by Greg Cox

First, a warning: if you don't want to know how this novel ends, read no further. On the other hand, don't expect me to reveal the ending either; the whole point of this very creepy novel is the uncertainty at the center of the web.

In the past, whenever I've read a Scott Baker novel it's been under notably strange and disorienting circumstances—I read *Dhampire* while trying to sleep on a cold sidewalk during an all-night vigil outside an unemployment office, and *Nightchild* while stranded at an airport wondering what happened to a friend who was supposed to get off a certain flight and hadn't—and I've always wondered if the feverish, dark, obsessive qualities I found in those books (especially *Dhampire*) came from me or from Baker.

Now I know. I read *Webs* on a quiet Sunday afternoon, and found it even more disturbing than Baker's other books—as well as more subtle. *Dhampire* was a bizarre and strikingly original combination of horror, sex, mythology and mysticism that capered, compellingly, on that fine line between the eclectic and the kitchen sink; whereas *Nightchild* was a psychedelic, A. E. Van Vogt style space opera laced with surreal, frequently grotesque imagery. Although I preferred *Dhampire*—cold pavement and all—both books worked as exercises in glorious, somewhat perverse excess. (Regrettably, I never found time to read Baker's subsequent *Asylum* series.) *Webs*, by contrast, is controlled, calculating and very creepy. . . .

A young academic, Brian Gerard, accepts a teaching job at a second-rate Florida college after years abroad in Europe and Africa. Brian is under a lot of emotional and financial stress; not only is this his first real job, for which he is only marginally qualified, but his wife Julie has suffered a severe mental breakdown, requiring a lengthy (and expensive) period of hospitalization. What's worse, the possibility exists that Julie's madness is, either through some sort of telepathic rapport or simply as a result of their former intimacy, infecting Brian and driving him to strange, unaccountable actions—like decapitating small insects and arranging them in careful patterns on the kitchen table.

Baker vividly captures the day-to-day desperation of Brian's struggle to stay afloat, as well as the pain and anger and loneliness his wife's illness appears to be causing him. Certainly, at this point, Brian seems to be more sinned against than sinning.

Notice all the qualifiers in the paragraphs above! Even having read the final chapter of *Webs* five or six times, I feel obliged to keep hedging my bets—which is a measure of just how uneasy and uncomfortable Baker makes you feel by the end. And, by its very nature and purpose, horror may well be the only genre in which adjectives like "unsettling," "disturbing," and "upsetting" are considered good blurbs copy.)

On at least one level, Brian hits bottom about a third of the way through the book, when he staggers home after a drunken sexual

<sup>5</sup>Jeffrey Berman, "Where's All the Fiction in Science Fiction," in *Future Female: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Marleen Barr, Bowling Green Popular Press, 1981, p. 172.

<sup>6</sup>Barbara Johnson, "Gender Theory and the Yale School," in *A World of Difference*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987, p. 45.

encounter with a repellent female colleague to discover that the lush greenness of his college-provided estate ("It's almost too alive here, Brian thought") has been invaded/infested by dozens of large golden spiders, four inches long or larger, spreading their webs all around him . . .

And then what happens? Ah, here's where things start to get really tricky, for while Brian provides the only point of view in this book, he is by no means a reliable source: he's half-crazed, he lies frequently to his students and co-workers, and, most alarming of all, he's an accomplished self-hypnotist who is capable of programming his own behavior, creating incredibly life-like hallucinations, and even *implanting false memories in himself*. We see him do all of this in relatively innocuous circumstances, but that makes the alert reader wonder: is he doing it when we don't know he's doing it?

Thus, every one of his memories, every flashback, is suspect: "He could only live with it, within it, never really knowing for sure exactly where the boundaries between what was going on inside his head and what was going on in the world outside were, because they were both part the same, real thing."

Still, from one point of view, Brian's life steadily improves after that first, inebriated introduction to the spiders. He enlists the assistance of Karen, an attractive young student with an M.A. in arachnology, leading to a passionate affair which helps him to break free of his soul-destroying emotional bond to his crazy wife ("We were like two people drowning together, trying to save themselves by standing on each other's shoulders"). True, there are some temporary setbacks on the road to mental health, and maybe Karen is a bit on the kinky side—she's into bondage of a different sort—but by the last page everything from the oversize spiders to the mysterious disappearance of the loathsome female colleague is explained away, and Brian even seems to have gotten his teaching career together.

And so we have one possible ending, the happy one, where a man fights free of insanity and settles down to live peacefully ever after with his true love and her pretty golden spiders.

But wait. What is Karen doing down in her basement laboratory? What about that supposedly Julie-induced "hallucination" of her preying on the missing professor like a human tarantula? (Karen was bitten by one of the spiders, remember. Could that be important?) And how come the real spiders just keep getting bigger and bigger? Could it be that our hero has wandered unknowingly into a fool's paradise? Has he escaped Julie's "webs" only to snare himself in something far more sinister and inhuman?

That's an equally valid way to read the ending.

Or is Brian a victim at all? We can't really trust him, after all; even in his final encounter with Julie in the sanitarium we see him recalling at least one incident that we know never happened, even if Brian doesn't anymore. And let's not forget that he's not just a self-hypnotist; Brian's been diligently practicing his "trance work" with Karen—and Julie before her. Who's infecting whom with madness? One ordinarily thinks of female spiders as being the most predatory, but, as is pointed out several times, the spiders at Brian's place ignore the customary sexual dimorphism of the species, so that the males are as likely to

consume the females as the other way around. Perhaps Brian is not as sane as he thinks, and his latest lover is in a lot more trouble than she appears.

I lean towards the last interpretation, that Brian is somehow at the heart of some genuine horrors here, if only because I've read enough of Scott Baker's works to expect something more complex than the two more obvious interpretations. The happy ending is too pat and unconvincing, and makes the last two hundred pages rather pointless—if you accept Brian's take on the events—while an ending in which he falls prey to a seductive black widow woman reeks too heavily of cliché and coincidence. I'm not sure I know exactly what Brian's done and when he did it, but he's hiding something from the reader and himself. Indeed, what *Webs* really seems to be about is repression: safety at the expense of sanity, through the means and metaphor of self-hypnosis. First, there's the sheer denial of that superficially happy ending (although it's worth noting that Brian repeatedly describes this idyl in terms of safety than joy), then there's the shifting of blame to Julie and Karen and the spiders (Julie claims to have once compared Brian to a spider. He dismisses this—after all, she's crazy), and finally, so deeply buried that only hints of it emerge in the text, is the terrible possibility of his own guilt and responsibility.

" . . . this was just a memory, a memory of a fantasy that never happened, and it wasn't his real memory, it was Julie's memory, Julie making him remember things that weren't true, but she couldn't make him, he wouldn't let her make him remember, it wasn't real so he didn't have to remember it, he did not have to remember any of it because it wasn't *his fault* (italics mine) so he didn't have to remember it because it wasn't real . . . "

Deliberate ambiguity is a dangerous game; at its worst it can degenerate into a fuzzy blur of half-baked plots and pictures. Part of the trick is to ground the enigmas in something like Baker's humid, webby tropical drescape, full of roasting bananas ("beginning to shrivel like detumescent penises"), centipedes, dragonflies, phosphorescent algae, sandspurs, and spiders. In contrast to the ambiguity surrounding its plot and characters, the images in *Webs* are precisely detailed and richly evoked. A tangled web this may be, but a gorgeous one too, and fascinating.

Beyond that, the uncertainty here serves a very specific purpose: the creation of a mood. Baker has diabolically structured his narrative so that many of the most important plot revelations occur only in Brian's not-to-be-trusted mind. Baker forces you to read very closely, ever on the look-out for some deceit, some tampering with or concealment of what is really going on. Does that reference to Brian's African experience gibe with a previous account? Is there an unusually hypnotic cadence to this section of prose? In a nasty metafictional way, and as an insidious triumph of technique, *Webs* is a novel of paranoid horror that, by making you suspicious of both hero and author, turns the reader paranoid.

And, as demonstrated by everything from Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw" to Stephen King's *The Shining*, doubt is often the essence of literary horror. ▲

## Geek Love by Katherine Dunn

New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989; \$18.95 hc; 348 pp.

reviewed by Gordon Van Gelder

### 1. The Nuclear Family

The 1980s will not stand out in U.S. history as one of the more rebellious eras. Dominated by the Reagan Administration, and constantly being contrasted wistfully to the '60s by "grown-up hippies," the 1980s definitely put up the appearance of being back to normal. Two cars in every garage, a chicken in every pot, *The Cosby Show* every Thursday night.

Reading the fiction written in this decade, however, I find that the 1980s appear more as two cars in every pot and a chicken in every garage. The nuclear family, well, emits radiation. Sometimes, in fact, I feel as though the books I'm reading are competing to create The

Weirdest Family. I'd thought Stephen Wright's *M31: A Family Romance* had taken the prize in fiction from *The Hotel New Hampshire* (the Van Gelder Family is the leading contender in non-fiction!), but I think now that *Geek Love* has come on strong at the finish to win the prize.

Al Binewski heads the Fabulon, a traveling circus he inherited from his father (whose ashes accompany the Fabulon everywhere, being contained in a jar affixed to the circus's main generator). Al's a master showman with a swooping moustache, a barking voice, and a keen head for business.

His wife, the lovely Crystal Lil, was originally a geek, and what a

Check our freezer for proof.

geek she was. To quote Al, "she made the nipping off of noggins such a crystal mystery that the hens themselves yearned toward her, waltzing around her, hypnotized with longing" (p. 3). Born of well-to-do Bostonians, Lil took up with the circus as an act of rebellion. Her way of insuring the circus's future—and Al's way, too—was to produce show children. How? Genetic manipulation.

The first surviving child, Arturo, was born with fins instead of arms and legs. Arturo the Aqua-Boy put on fine performances in his tank.

Then came the twins, lovely Electra and Iphigenia, identically beautiful faces, long black hair and joined at the hip. Their piano virtuosity grew with the years.

Olympia, our narrator, didn't appear to be much when she was born, just an albino with a hump. As she aged, though, she didn't grow up, and her dwarfism added to her family value, though she never had her own show and learned instead the vocal skills of a Barker.

And finally came Fortunato, known as Chick, who was apparently normal. Al was ready to abandon the baby when the youth's talents emerged as he hurtled Lil off the ground *without touching her*. Chick, boy wonder, was born with telekinetic powers—the Binewskis could keep him.

Of course, there were the children who didn't survive, two-headed Janus, boneless Maple, Clifford "who looked like a lasagna pan full of exposed organs with a monkey head attached" (p. 54), The Fist, Apple, and Leona "the Lizard Girl."

With this line-up, the Fabulon naturally attracts all types of oddballs from all over the country, legless men and deranged nurses, obese women and emaciated journalists, and the bulk of the book follows the talented children as they grow up and take over the Fabulon. To read this book is to explore a fascinating alien world traveling through the heartland of America.

So I give the Binewskis the Weirdest Family award, but I can't help but wonder why weird families seem to be proliferating. Well, the most striking characteristic of the Binewskis is not their weirdness but their normalcy. We see ourselves in them, freaks though they be. We relate with the twins' bickering, understand the arrogance of the first-born son, sympathize with the effects of the physical deformities on the kids' perceptions of themselves. We identify with the freaks. Why? Because nobody fits into the standard patterns of normalcy during this conservative decade; we read books of substance and not pre-packaged, best-selling trash; we believe there's more to life than earning and spending money; we don't want our children growing up to be swallowed by some corporation; we don't believe everyone who has used an illegal drug is evil incarnate; we don't follow this week's trends. You see.

## II. We are all Freaks

I know I am. I'm flat-footed and walk funny. I chew my toenails. My voice prompts people throughout the year to ask if I have a cold. I gain weight just by inhaling deeply in a bakery. My left foot is half a size larger than my right foot. I like vegetables.

Part of what Ms. Dunn has tapped into with tremendous success is that youthful conviction we never outgrow fully: we look funny. It's part of almost everyone's psyche, even the so-called Beautiful People. We're fat, or thin, or tall, or dwarfed and albino with a hump on our shoulder. What's more, while we're stuck with our strange selves, other people are normal.

Part of becoming an adult is acknowledging that other people share this feeling. It's the flip side of acknowledging solipsism as a fantasy. Ms. Dunn has investigated this feeling particularly effectively, creating exceedingly deformed people who feel and act just like us.

The freakishness isn't solely physical, of course. Chick, with his world-changing psychic powers, grows up to become the bare-footed, sleepish kid in overalls whose hair everyone wants to tousle. As Art says,

There are those whose own vulgar normality is so apparent and stultifying that they strive to escape it. They affect flamboyant behavior and claim originality according to the fashionable eccentricities of their time. They claim brains

or talent or indifference to mores in desperate attempts to deny their own mediocrity. These are frequently artists and performers, adventurers and wide-life devotees.

Then there are those who feel their own strangeness and are terrified by it. They struggle toward normalcy. They suffer to exactly that degree that they are unable to appear normal to others, or to convince themselves that their aberration does not exist. These are true freaks, who appear, almost always, conventional and dull. (pp. 281-282)

Take a minute now to think about the 1980s. Remember when the Chief Executive of our nation slept through the Libyan crisis? Remember Al "I'm in charge here" Haig? How about that model of normalcy, Secretary of the Interior James Watt, destroying the environment in God's will? How about Jerry Falwell? Let's face it, the stuff appearing on the nightly news, the stuff appearing nightly on television, is *weird*; unfortunately, all us screwballs who don't think all the Bible-thumping, God-blessed right-wing behavior is normal have got to turn to the *Weekly World News* for a little sanity. (The very name I wrote this review, the headline read: "2-HEADED WOMAN: TM PREGNANT!" One head wants a girl—the other a boy!" Evidently someone at the *Weekly World News* read *Geek Love* too.)

## III. Geek Love

Arturo Binewski is proud, vain, headstrong, and incapable of walking. Frankly, I'm not sure what Olympia sees in him, but that's the way love is.

The brunt of the story belongs to Art; he wouldn't have it any other way. Art needs to be the Main Attraction and whether it's the twins' piano show or Olympia's narrative, Art can't let anybody upstage him. His power grows convincingly through the book until he supplants Al as the leader of the carnival, and continues beyond that to the "norms," the people beyond the world of the Fabulon. Nightly visits from normal women don't make him content. Even having a cult of followers, all of whom aspire to have their arms and legs removed, fails to satisfy Art. Unconditional love is what he demands, and what he receives from Olympia, even though she knows it will never be reciprocated.

By definition, Platonic love exists between two people, traditionally between two men. It is ideal and not of this world, taking place on a higher plane of being than that in which we live. We on Earth are stuck with clumsy, awkward partnerships that abound in insecurities and inequalities. We on Earth are stuck with geek love.

I think Olympia speaks for us all:

I have certainly mourned for myself. I have wallowed in grief for the lonesome, deliberate seep of my love into the air like the smell of unseasoned popcorn greening to rubbery staleness. In the end I would always pull myself up with a sense of glory, that loving is the strong side. It's feeble to be an object. What's the point of being loved in return, I'd ask myself. To warm my spine in the dark? To change the face in my mirror every morning? (p. 309)

I dare say that all of us who have lived have felt this insecurity, have known these pains and pleasures. Geek love is the only kind of love we freaks know; it's also one of the best books I've read in ages. Perhaps I've just read too much self-indulgent, self-satisfied, self-fixated fiction of late, but this novel's ability to reach (and share) something common to everyone—and to do so without pretensions—took it beyond this moment and into a realm few books ever attain. Ms. Dunn writes very well, the book is absolutely absorbing, but she forsakes stylistic pyrotechnics for the story's sake: almost every word is determined by the story and not by the author's desire to impress the readers. *Geek Love* is intelligent, yet it doesn't feel the need to convince the readers of its intelligence on every page. *Geek Love* is wonderfully original, but it doesn't bend over backwards incessantly to display its unique qualities. It's wonderfully symmetrical that a book about our insecurities should be so self-assured in its writing; and, for symmetry's sake, let me add that the book is wonderful. ▴



## Recapitulating Phylogeny

Continued from page 1

but it's only an isolated incident." My external reaction in all three cases (as well as in others literally too numerous to count, many of which I'm placing in context only now) was "ladylike" silence. I changed the subject with the date and gave the teacher a polite poke on the cheek, followed by a hasty exit from the room; in the meeting I simply slammed up, and none of the other four people there (three of them women, the fourth the man the consultant chose to speak to when he decided to ignore me) asked me what I had been going to say.

It's taken a lot of those isolated incidents for me to see the insidious patterns involved—the extent to which I've been trained to give away power, just as men have been trained to take it—or to begin to talk about those patterns openly, or to identify myself as a feminist in the sense that my Clarion classmate might have intended it. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a much scarier book to me now than it was in 1986.

And if I, born in 1960 to politically liberal parents, have come to this gradual awakening, it's hard not to wonder just how much the women's movement has still left untouched. Many people, including women, would like to believe that all the work has been done already, that abuse of male authority—like polio and smallpox—is either entirely eradicated or exists only in remote backwaters where you can't expect people to be enlightened anyway, because they're all starving to death and can't read. When I try to discuss my new perceptions with friends, many of them react with open discomfort. Men are often threatened and defensive, and too many women still view mistreatment of women as a string of isolated incidents. Nor are the authorities who are supposed to be protecting all of us necessarily alerted to what we need protection from. When I called the police because a woman in my apartment building was being beaten, one of the cops told me, "Oh, they were probably just having wild sex." This, mind you, after months of media saturation on the Steinberg case.

I find myself wondering if each new generation will have to rediscover the subtler forms of sexism all over again, just as all fetuses have to recapitulate phylogeny. Is there any way for people—women and men—to seek out underlying patterns without enduring all those isolated incidents first?

Because, in fact, there aren't any isolated incidents. That's annoying, but it's only an isolated incident," is akin to the phrases Joanna Russ identifies so wittily in *How To Suppress Women's Writing*. She wrote it, but she had help. She wrote it, but it's only about housework. She wrote it, but she was married to Robert Browning and anyway it was only love sonnets (who remembers *Aurora Leigh*? And anyway, *Aurora Leigh*'s only about a lady poet). She wrote it, but she only wrote one of it. And so forth.

Minimizing men's abuse of power is as easy, and as prevalent, and as damaging as minimizing women's literary output. In literature as in high-level corporate conference rooms, it can be distressingly difficult for women to find voices that men will listen to. (Women's writing about their own experiences is dismissed as women talking to themselves, the way they've always talked in kitchens and over backyard fences. How many men do you know who read the stuff?)

Men do, however, read science fiction. In *The Chinks of the World Machine* examines how science fiction, traditionally as "male" a literary province as the Regency romance is a "female" one, allows feminist writers to reexamine and reimagine women's role in society. Lefanu points out that science fiction is an inherently skeptical genre, and that feminism, too, "is based upon a profound skepticism of the 'naturalness' of the patriarchal world and the belief in male superiority on which it is founded" (p. 92).

The book is researched thoroughly and is thoroughly refreshing, both because it debunks the notion of post-feminism—which, in science fiction, has been used to minimize and invalidate the outpouring of feminist science fiction during the 1970's—and because it shows that feminism is not a monolithic belief system maintained by machete-wielding women who hate men.

Lefanu's definition of feminism, which goes light-years beyond easy vows of equal pay for equal work, is the interrogation of the very notion of gender. If "masculine" and "feminine" are social constructs, the role of the feminist writer is to deconstruct them, and sf—a genre with fewer fixed rules than many others—provides a

perfect arena in which to do so.

SF has its own constructs, however, and not everything that initially looks like feminism is. One of the more entertaining aspects of the book is Lefanu's guided tour through many of the approaches women at writers have taken to gender issues, and how many of them reinforce the existing order rather than challenging it. "Creating a female protagonist simply seems to me an obvious stratagem a science fiction writer can adopt to offset the weight of books-by-men-for-men under which the reader sometimes feels herself squashed. My emphasis, then, is not on female characters as simple protagonists, but on the *how* and the *why* and the *what end*" (pp. 24-25).

The book is divided into two sections; in the first, Lefanu analyzes specific narrative strategies and how women have used them: woman as traveling heroine, woman as Amazon, women writing about matriarchal societies, feminist utopias, and dystopias. In the process, she reveals an exhaustive knowledge of both science fiction and its literary antecedents. In the second section she discusses in depth the work of specific writers: Tiptree, Le Guin, Chamas, and Russ.

Lefanu's discussions are precise, objective, and rigorous; nor is she afraid to criticize apparently feminist writers who aren't. While praising Josephine Saxton's questioning women and the ways in which Joanna Russ subverts sword-and-sorcery tropes in her *Alyx* stories, Lefanu also delivers a scathing analysis of Marion Zimmer Bradley's depiction of a separatist matriarchal society in *The Ruins of Ith*. Although her quotations from the book condemn it almost more than her actual discussion does, Lefanu provides suitably withering commentary: "... Bradley's intention seems to be to forgive men for their unkindness towards women by showing that women can be just as bad as men. ... What is expressed most strongly is a fear of powerful, strong women: their downfall must be engineered, and what more welcome downfall than love for a man?" (p. 44).

Bradley, in other words, is reinforcing patriarchal notions, rather than undermining them. Similarly, Lefanu's final word on Le Guin is that she "speaks with the voice of authority—although it is a voice that is at once self-critical and encouraging to others—rather than against it" (p. 146). In contrast, Lefanu praises Tiptree's subversive use of male personae and Chamas' creation of increasingly complex female characters. Her most generous praise, however, is reserved for Russ, who she introduces with the observation that "Joanna Russ is the single most important woman writer of science fiction, although she is not necessarily the most widely read" (p. 173).

Aye, and there's the rub. How many of the works discussed in this book are being widely read, by women or men? How much science fiction is widely read? *The Handmaid's Tale*, discussed in Lefanu's chapter on dystopias, is a notable and heartening exception; Lefanu has previously described such dystopias as an exploration of the "nightmare land of silence in which the struggle for subjecthood and autonomous speech is paramount." But how many of the books that break that silence are heard? What good is writing a feminist book if only other feminists read it? What good is getting a spiffy corporate job if the men you're working with won't listen to you when you get there? The very fact that *In the Chinks of the World Machine* is published by the Women's Press will keep many men—and probably many women—from reading it.

Lefanu acknowledges the problem when she says, "While an emphasis on traditionally feminine values—embodied in the wise woman rather than the commander—does challenge science fictional norms, there is a danger that this SF might slip too much into sentiment, and become ghettoized precisely as 'women's SF' " (p. 92). I've seen writers and editors who avow explicitly feminist sympathies find other ways to ghettoize women's concerns, such as sneering at children's literature. Children, the traditional concern of their mothers, have less power than women do, and therefore books written for them must be unimportant. "She wrote it, but it's only YA." This attitude—which excludes *The Hobbit*, *The Wind in the Willows* and the Oz books as surely as it does *A Wrinkle in Time* and the Earthsea Trilogy—has led to the dismissal, in some circles, of such eminently worthy and relevant writers as Jane Yolen.

A mere eight pages after the comment about traditionally feminine values, Lefanu observes, "If we want to see what women writers of science fiction have to offer the reader, then we shouldn't be

sidetracked by essentialist, and finally moralistic notions of 'feminine' and 'masculine'. . . (p. 100). Yet her analysis, cogent though it is, nowhere suggests how feminist writers challenging those notions can escape being judged by the people who still hold them. If *The Handmaid's Tale* went over my head three years ago, how many of the unquestioning male chauvinists who could most benefit by reading *The Female Man* are even going to pick it up, let alone understand it if they do?

Perhaps reading *The Handmaid's Tale* planted the seeds that led to my later realizations; perhaps the most important task of feminist writers is to write books for other feminists, who will then find their own ways to break silence in ways audible to men who won't read the books. If enough people break silence often enough, perhaps individuals will no longer have to recapitulate political phylogeny. In the *Cranks of the World Machine* does a masterful job of analyzing the statements that have already been made within science fiction, and for that it must be congratulated; Lefanu's intention was never to tell us where to go next.

I'll suggest one path: go to your bookstore and get this book, along with Atwood's and as much Russ as you can find, and read them, and talk to as many people as you can about what you've read and what it means for the world outside the books. If you talk about it enough, some of the people who need to hear what you're saying may even listen. And if they try to make you shut up, don't.

This should only be as easy as it sounds. I'd like to think that I'm now capable of being completely vociferous, of standing up for myself in social situations, classrooms and corporate meetings, but despite marked improvement, my reaction time still needs some work. A few

weeks ago, I was a guest on an early-morning radio show about sf. One of the callers, who demonstrated knowledge of only one of my stories, criticized my writing for being "coquettish."

I was puzzled, since the piece is a rather grim horror story. Dutifully trying to figure out what he meant, I asked him to define the term. It turned out that he thought the story—a reworking of "Cinderella"—contained too much description of clothing.

"Well," I said, "it was my first attempt to write a consciously visual story, but maybe you're right."

No. Unlike my Clarion classmate, he wasn't right. A friend I talked to later that day said, "Susan, you're working with female genre conventions in that story. That's why he didn't get it."

She was right. In Cinderella stories, clothing is important: a sign of power, a sign of what women are told they should become and of what they therefore want to become. The caller didn't understand that I might be working in a tradition different than the ones he knew; instead of correcting him, I tried to understand his viewpoint, just as I had tried to understand the college professor's viewpoint. At the end of the call, he seemed surprised and gratified that I had taken his comments so seriously. I wonder how many male writers would have reacted as I did, rather than having the self-confidence simply to assert their own vision of the story.

It's time for all of us who have traditionally been excluded from power to begin insisting on the legitimacy of our own viewpoints and experiences, instead of forever trying to understand everyone else's. Like writing, this is hard work and takes practice. In both cases, the reward is coming out at the other end with your own story, instead of someone else's. ▴

## The S/F Revolution and the Rescue of Science Fiction

*Full Spectrum 2* edited by Lou Aronica, Shawna McCarthy,  
Amy Stout, and Patrick LoBrutto

New York: Doubleday Foundation, \$19.95 hc; 464 pp.

reviewed by Kathryn Cramer

### *Too Many Editors Spoil the Book?*

The easy way to review *Full Spectrum 2* would be to list the best stories in the book, amounting to about 150 pages of fiction adequate to the book's pretensions (about a third of the whole); say that the book is big for the sake of sheer size, and that it would be improved if cut by about two hundred pages; that the book contains one of the most ill-advised and occasionally offensive anthology introductions I've read in a long time; and that the contributors fall into roughly three categories: (a) established name writers, nearly all of whom are award winners or frequent award nominees, (b) Spectra/Foundation authors, and (c) new writers, many of whom are previously unpublished—this last category forming a sort of Writers-of-the-Future anthology in miniature. Some of the S/F authors have been nominated for or have won awards, and some of the new writers have sold novels to S/F, so these categories overlap. And several of the contributors, Michaela Roessner (who won this year's Crawford Award for best first fantasy novel) and Alan Rodgers (who won a Bram Stoker Award this past year, and was nominated for a World Fantasy Award), meet all three criteria.

It's unclear whether the book's four co-editors are inadequate to the task, or whether the editors' interactions have simply produced an uneasy truce between warring aesthetics. It's the editorial team's duty and obligation to the anthology form to fill *Full Spectrum 2* with the best fiction possible and to reject material not up to the level of quality already attained. Since the book is an original anthology, they are further obliged to edit the stories to their ideal state. Not enough of this seems to have happened on the road to *Full Spectrum 2*. Although the book was certainly *competed*, presumably by all four people whose names appear on the cover, it does not seem to have been *edited* by anyone.

### *Riding the Minicycle*

Most of the book's interior is a sequence of miniature theme

anthologies—the editorial team calls them minicycles. Themes include alien contact, religion, the internal life, memory, plagues, Americans, and the exploration of space. The purpose of the minicycles seems to be to shape the lumpen masses of undistinguished stories a coherent book. It doesn't work.

A theme anthology is a tricky business. The anthologist must consider carefully what each story says about the theme, selecting and positioning it accordingly. Terry Carr claimed that a good general anthology never contains two or more stories of the same type. And while careful anthologists can and do overcome this problem, *Full Spectrum 2*'s editors seem oblivious to contextual aesthetics. The casual placement of stories on roughly the same theme adjacent one another emphasizes the sameness of these stories and deemphasizes their virtues. The art of the anthology is like the art of the collage: the juxtaposition of objects (in this case, stories) must be considered almost as carefully as the selection of the objects themselves. The failure of the book's minicycle structure demonstrates the validity of Terry Carr's aesthetic. The editorial team's inattention to this level of the craft leaves us with a poorly organized book.

Of the various minicycles, only two had big ideas in themselves: the minicycles on the theme of the 'internal life' and the one on Americans.

Metaphors in non-naturalistic fiction tend to *externalize* the internal life: psychology works itself out through the interactions of character, plot and setting in the external world of the story. The two stories in the internal life minicycle illustrate how sf stories overtly addressing the internal life can undermine the virtues of the science fiction mode. "The Boy in the Tree" by Elizabeth Hand is reminiscent of—but not nearly as accomplished as—Pat Cadigan's *Mindplayers*, published by Bantam Spectra two years ago. Hand's story shows a lot of talent and has some lovely scenes. But, like Cadigan's book, it lacks a solidly literal level to give the story stability of meaning. All the scenes that take place in settings inside a character's mind must be understood as metaphors for the psychology of the characters. But by its nature,

psychology is a metaphor for what is the case. Thus both Cadigan's novel and Hand's story leave us partially without a literal level. "All Our Sins Forgotten" by David Ira Cleary is a tiresomely post-Gibsonian tale which tries to address Being and self-annihilation. Cleary's attempt at cyberpunk "cramped" prose lacks energy. His sentences trip over their subordinate phrases and clauses, rather than gaining momentum from them. And, inasmuch as the story succeeds in addressing its emotional subject matter, it pales compared to Michael Swanwick's "The Edge of the World," also in this volume.

Given that these tales of desperate people who take a lot of drugs and have wires trailing from their heads are insubstantial echoes of the work of c-word authors, one wonders whether this is intended as the cyberpunk section of the book—perhaps the editorial team believes that cyberpunk is primarily about the literal inner life of the characters . . . ?

As for the Americana section, while there exists a body of fiction by US and Canadian authors that could be described as Americana, the sections in the Americana section—"Then I Sleeps and Dreams of Rose," "A Plethora of Angels," and "Strange Attractors"—all lack the naïve authenticity of true Americana. The characteristics placing a story in the Americana section are a U. S. regional accent or a setting in rural U. S. A. To label a section Americana in a book as American as *Full Spectrum* 2 is foolish at best—and perhaps even offensive to the extent that it implies that the very Americana fiction filling the rest of the book is representative of and is indistinguishable from the fiction of the rest of the world.

"Then I Sleeps and Dreams of Rose" by Deborah Millon (also, simultaneously, in the religious minicycle) is a horror/revenge fantasy about what it's like to be in hell. The tone is watered-down Flannery O'Connor. Stylistically the story uses many of the same tricks as Dennis Richison's "You Can Go Now"—in several scenes, a man who killed his wife relives her death from various perspectives until, at the end, we understand what he did and what is happening to him. Unfortunately Millon has a beginner's lack of emotional control of her material. One of O'Connor's great strengths was her ability to write about a lachrymose situation so that the story transcended the subject matter. Richison's strength is his compassion. Certainly, Millon wrote about a lachrymose situation: In the story's central scene, told from two different view points, the protagonist beats a woman named Rose to death. The story tries to redeem the situation by having the central character punished horribly—sent to hell. This childish justice does not bring about transcendence of subject matter, nor does it show compassion for either Rose or her murderer. If the story entertains at all, it does it for all the wrong reasons.

"A Plethora of Angels" by Robert Sampson is a charming but rather fluffy story of an American small town visited by angels who more resemble Tinkerbell or the British fairies in the garden than the Christian concept of angels, which is all right. The story demands little of the reader, and it expects the same. Perhaps this story is meant to represent the Lite Fantasy part of the spectrum.

Lori Ann White's "Strange Attractors" is about a geologist lost in the desert of either Eastern Washington or Utah who may or may not have been visited by a woman, perhaps of Navajo, and who may or may not have talked to him about a subject that may or may not have been strange attractors. As though intentionally teasing the reader, from the first sentence, the author leaves things ambiguous: *He might be lost in the Utah desert with a ruined compass, be might have a half-empty canteen and no shelter . . .* (p. 242) My guess is that the editors bought the story because they mistook ambiguity for literary quality. Some great literature is ambiguous, but not all ambiguous literature is great. A deliberately ambiguous story—Robert Aickman's "The Hospice," or Gene Wolfe's "Seven American Nights," for example—can profoundly call into question the nature of reality, but this story is about as interesting as a badly-focused snap shot. It is also unclear to me how the story benefits from being read as Americana.

The editors could have dropped both the inner life and the Americana minicycles without damaging the book. The stories in these sections are mediocre, and clustering them does not improve them.

#### The Better Third

Conventional wisdom among anthologists (and some reviewers

and editors) says that the first and last stories in an anthology must be stronger ones; as well, they should help define the book as a whole. Although the first and last stories, "Saurus Wrecks" by Edward Bryant and "The Part of Us that Loves" by Kim Stanley Robinson, are among the better stories in the book, both are poor choices with which to bracket the anthology. They are the least *fantastic* of all the stories in the book. Thus, the editors seem to be saying *these stories are so good that they are almost not science fiction or fantasy*, i.e. that the stories transcend their humble origins, and attain literature despite the fact that they are both by science fiction writers.

Ed Bryant told me that he thinks his story is *sf* because it is set in a town that went through an industrially induced climatic change. The story is *sf* to about the same extent that Texarkana is in Texas. The Bryant story is not so much *sf* as an anthem to post-modernism that delicately declines the lurid lure of the fantastic, celebrating instead a life lived in the ruins of civilization. It's a sophisticated story with Bryant's usual concern with the psycho-sexuality of large, primitive carnivores and his dark sense of humor. It need not be read as *sf* though, and I suspect that its consequent inoffensiveness to literary sensibilities has something to do with its position in the book.

As the first story in *Full Spectrum* 2, and with the opening line, "I'm glad I lived long enough to see a time when the world became a more primitive place," the story is set up to disappoint a reader who expects the fantastic: the dinosaur assembled over the course of the story does not come alive—except in the sense of becoming a large toposy sculpture. To enjoy the story as placed, that reader must feel herself wrong to expect the fantastic.

Even worse, by following on the heels of the introduction—in which Aronica declares how pleased he is that *Full Spectrum* 2 is not really a science fiction and fantasy anthology—the story's placement makes it function as an indication of editorial contempt for the field, an unusual and disturbing sentiment coming from major science fiction editors.

As for the final story in the book, Kim Stanley Robinson's "The Part of Us that Loves" is more *about* fantasies than it is a fantasy. The female central character has a series of lovely Walker Mitty-like fantasies about bible stories and a boy in her class. The editors' introduction calls the story magic realism (p. 439). Robinson may or may not have been influenced by the magic realists. The story is more like a sequel to the musical *The Music Man*. (Musical realism, perhaps?)

As a showcase supporting science fiction and fantasy, *Full Spectrum* 2 should begin with a strong story that is solidly *sf*—perhaps "Malheur Maar" by Vonda N. McIntyre or "Rain, Steam and Speed" by Steven Popkes—and end with a strong and solidly fantasy story—perhaps "The Edge of the World" by Michael Swanwick or "Sleepside Story" by Greg Bear, or vice versa.

"Malheur Maar," a small gem of a story, is badly placed as the third in a sequence of three stories of frustrated alien contact. Because of its brevity and its anecdotal structure, it is perhaps not of grand enough scope to set the tone for the volume; it is a solid science fiction story.

"Rain, Steam and Speed" by Steven Popkes is a New Physics story about art, guilt, and observer-created realities. The story posits a distinction between technological and artistic mindsets. The following excerpt is from a conversation between a ship's pilot and the central character, an artist named Gossic:

"You'd make a bad pilot." [The pilot] drank some water.

"You have too much imagination."

"That's the first time I've heard it was a liability," [said Gossic]

"You're an artist. You change. That's how creativity works. That's your business. That's you. . . . I'm a good pilot because I don't change much. . . . you're a product of your universe. Everything that occurs, all of the moments making it up, all of the events, time, movements, leave their mark on you. . . . You don't change things. You change yourself. . . ." (pp. 343–344)

The pilot's response to events is to change the world; Gossic's is to change himself. While I'm not sure I agree with this distinction between technological and artistic solutions, it is certainly well-drawn.

"Rain, Steam and Speed" is the better of a pair of stories in the

book that use the possibilities of quantum mechanics to allow a man whose wife died tragically to find a universe in which he died but his wife survived. The other story with this plot, far less insightful, is "Shiva" by James Killus. The Killus story's physics gimmick is not well enough realized to justify the story's first line: *I destroyed another universe today*. The two stories are too similar to include in the same original anthology and the weaker of the pair should've been dropped.

"The Edge of the World" by Michael Swanwick, my favorite story in the book and the best fantasy story that I have read this year, is a wondrously bleak story about adolescent despair. The story's religious miracle is simultaneously an act of total self-annihilation. Like Kim Stanley Robinson's story, Swanwick's handles the topic and themes of religion and religious experience much better than any of the stories in the religious minicollection.

In the story introduction, the editors compare Greg Bear's "Slipside Story" to the work of Charles Dickens (p. 375). While one can see Dickens's influences in the selection of characters and situations, his influence is filtered through more recent works like Walter De La Mare's "Sister's Aunt" and Gene Wolfe's "The Fifth Head of Cerberus."

The book's jacket copy contains the odd statement that, "... the people that Bear shows us and the problems he addresses belong unmistakably to our time." Is this another attempt to slight *sf* in favor of realism? The world of the story resembles a dark fantastic New York City, and since all the co-editors of the book (who presumably also had a hand in the flap copy) live in and around New York, their recognition of their own surroundings may account for that statement. The story also has the feel of both the nineteenth century and of a degenerate future. As for fantasy, the story has the defect that it sometimes tends too much toward the metaphorical at the expense of comprehensibility of its narrative. But the story has a lovely and lingering dream-like quality that transcends its flaws.

Other exceptional stories in the book are "An Excerpt from The Confessions of the Alchemist Edward Dee, Who Was Burnt in the City of Fandus on the Planet Paracelsus, 1437 PFC (Post Imperial Colonial Period)" by Michaela Roessner, "The Doorkeeper of Khaat" by Patricia A. McKillip, and "Dogs Die" by Michael Kallenberger.

"An Excerpt from ..." is a tale of adolescent betrayal reminiscent of Zenna Henderson's *People* stories. The editors should have encouraged Roessner to make some minor revisions: The story begins in the second person, fortunately abandoning it after the first paragraph or so, and has some awkward moments early on, when, in order to overcome the limitations of having a narrator who is also the central character, Roessner has the protagonist describe himself. Roessner should have cut the first two paragraphs that are unnecessary to the rest of the story. But these are minor flaws. Unlike many of the stories in this volume, in which barely enough happens for them to fit the label, this story delivers a large dollop of wonder at the end.

"The Doorkeeper of Khaat" by Patricia A. McKillip has somewhat the same affect as Gwyneth Jones's *Divine Endurance*. It is about two cultures with different concepts of death and a wealthy, terminally ill father who asks his son to be an accessory to his suicide. Although the story is fairly well done, its point is somewhat elusive.

An ironic tale of murder and salvation in deep space, "Dogs Die" by Michael Kallenberger is an *sf* story about space travel similar to James Tiptree Jr.'s "The Only Neat Thing to Do." While it doesn't have the flaw of glorifying depression and suicide, it also lacks Tiptree's emotional intensity. It's part of the minicollection on the exploration of space—where most of the book's real *sf* resides. His is the best of *Full Spectrum* 28 stories by previously unpublished writers.

The stories in this volume that are up to *Full Spectrum* 28's pretensions take up 155 pages out of 464—33%.

#### Two Stories That Could Have Been Improved

"As Still a Small Voice" by Marcos Donnelly and "Frankenstein Goes Home" by Alan Rodgers are both flawed, and could have been improved by wise editorial support and careful revision.

"As Still a Small Voice" has effective parts, but equal portions of dead weight and it takes several wrong turns while rushing to its theological conclusion. It could have been a much better story if put through another draft. The last line—"It is enough for me to believe

## Read This

Recently read and recommended by Charles Platt:

*Homegoing*, by Frederick Pohl. *Locust's* nitwit reviewer characterized this as a "happy" novel, but it's a coming-of-age adventure with a grim moral: any race, no matter how "pacifist," will act unscrupulously to assure its survival. A young-adult adventure with exemplary social observation.

*The Venus Primes* series sponsored by Clarke, written by Paul Preuss. Solid interplanetary science fiction, nicely told.

*Roadside America*, by Barth, Kirby, Smith, and Wilkins. Helps you plan your vacation to include vital landmarks such as the Liberate museum and the world's largest road runner.

*Free Zone*, by Charles Platt. Every major science-fiction theme in one slim volume. My mother really enjoyed this book. Of course, since she had her stroke, she enjoys just about anything.

*Mind Children*, by Hans Moravec. Leading researcher on artificial intelligence offers a breathtaking assemblage of wild ideas.

*The Stranger Beside Me*, by Ann Rule. Gripping confession by a True Detective magazine writer who actually met and worked with Ted Bundy on a suicide-prevention hotline, later kept in touch while he toured the country butchering sexy co-eds.

*Creating Short Fiction*, by Damon Knight. Full of lots of pedantic rules and warnings. Guaranteed to amuse and annoy.

*The Best Japanese Science Fiction Stories*, edited by Apollonius and Greenberg. (Grania Davis and Judith Merrill, not credited on the cover, did the real work.) Imaginative and strange.

*Hockney on Photography*, by Paul Joyce. Interviews and color plates. Hockney's unique photo collages teach a new way of seeing that has application to visual description in fiction.

*Out of Bondage*, by Linda Lovelace. Linda finally spills the beans about being scorched with a hair dryer and assaulted with a dildo, but her previous *Ordeal* was juicier.

*Interzone* magazine. This British bimonthly publishes a lot of gloomy twaddle but also some genuinely startling stories (mostly by Americans) that are too weird for U.S. magazines.

*Alice in La La Land*, by Robert Campbell. A closely observed hard-boiled detective novel about depraved Hollywood lounge.

*Cockfighter*, by Charles Willeford. Fascinating novel narrated by a misogynist mute, depicting 1970s Florida cockfighting in sickening detail.

*Threats and Other Promises*, by Vernor Vinge. Without doubt, the best science fiction story collection of 1988.

that maybe, there in my hands, is the personality of God" (p. 213)—is simply wrong. Even if God did have a hand in filling out the computerized test form in question, there is no reason to believe that God gave honest answers about his own personality. Quite the

contrary. And if one does accept the last line, the story is about how normal God is, which is non-sense; a deity is *by definition* not an average man. The story buried within this story, about the clergy's inability to deal with true miracles, is perhaps familiar (Suzette Haden Elgin's story, "Last Levitation Come Upon Us" come to mind), but Donnelly's rendition is either compelling.

"Frankenstein Goes Home" by Alan Rodgers suffers from self-indulgent and heavy-handed references to Frankenstein that he should have been asked to cut out. The thematic material suffices to convey the literary allusion. Also, the story's mad scientist is entirely unbelievable. The editors should have encouraged Rodgers to come up with a more reasonable pretext for the story's situation than the clichéd, easy device of asserting a wealthy and crazy scientist who just happens to live in a castle. The story's best moments occur during the several scenes when the monster ponders the nature of love.

When we add these two stories to the previous page count, we reach 191 pages out of 464: 41%.

### III-Fashion SF: Less Taste, More Filling

The remainder of the stories—the other 59%—are either congenitally flawed or are just not up to the quality of the rest of the book and for the book's aesthetic integrity should have been left out.

"Whistle" by Jack McDevitt is thin and its abrupt conclusion is unbelievable. Alien music broadcast through space turns out to be sort of melancholy—and therefore must be about death and mortality. Somehow the story is not as profound as intended.

"The Attitude of Earth Toward Other Bodies" by James Sallis—once the editor of *New Worlds* in its most florid post-Moorcock "new wave" days when, as Chip Delaney remarked, you couldn't tell the fiction from the ads—is a heavily metaphorical story about human relations and alien contact. Sallis uses quantum mechanics to establish his metaphors: "... science had advanced sufficiently that it ceased to be merely descriptive—that is, narrative—and became almost lyrical. There it, after all, not much distance between William James's insight that reality is relative and multiple, that the human mind (and therefore the world) is a fluid shimmering of consciousness, and Schrödinger's Cat (p. 21), and in quantum theory nothing is real unless it is observed (p. 22). He talks about quantum mechanics as though it were a settled issue, as though it established, once and for all, that artistic intuition trumps scientific analysis. In fact, there are many and various interpretations of quantum mechanics, and what Sallis asserts as fact is quite controversial. Sallis buries any insight that we might gain from his use of science under trite assertions that science and art are the same, and an excess of literary name-dropping.

The central character, a lonely SETI researcher transmitting signals into outer space in the hope of some reply, sends out various great works of music and literature. At one point, he transmits a Rilke poem read in English. So much about poetry is lost in translation. Was Sallis so eager to quote Rilke that it didn't occur to him that the researchers would be silly to transmit poetry in anything but its original language, German? Sallis is undercutting his character's artistic perceptiveness, thus undercutting the point of the story.

The story is written largely in the present tense. Some of his uses are intended to signal habitual action. But other scenes in the present tense clearly happened only once. Why did Sallis use the present tense, and in some cases even more awkward verb tenses, when the past tense would have served perfectly well? One gathers that he wishes his style to call attention to itself, breaking the illusion of the world of the story and making the readers notice the writer instead.

Sallis's themes, the impossibility of relations with women and the difficulties of alien contact, are much better handled in Stanislaw Lem's recent novel *Fiasco*, so much because Lem has more space to work with, but because Lem doesn't use his metaphors to undermine science. Sallis uses metaphor to pound his point home gracelessly—killing the story by uprooting its metaphors. While science fiction should have a metaphorical structure, the metaphorical must have its roots properly buried within the inner workings of the literal. That's why some critics like Tzvetan Todorov argue that the fantastic is inherently non-metaphorical. In the Lem novel, the metaphorical structure is properly rooted in and allowed to grow up from the literal.

Here the bones of metaphor stick up out of an all too shallow grave. May the excesses of the "new wave" rest in peace.

"A Plague of Strangers" by Karen Haber is well written and has a pleasant, intimate tone, but could have benefited from an injection of bracing gloom. Perhaps because the reader is kept emotionally too close to the central character and narrator—an inherent difficulty of the first person—the narrator's day-to-day anxiety never develops into the kind of real angst that the story's subject matter implies, leaving one with the impression that this plague that's going around isn't all that important.

"The Giving Plague" by David Brin is in the second person, addressed to a virus. I personally don't identify with viruses much and wonder to which readers Brin thought he was speaking. In general, Brin writes more convincingly about physics than about biology.

While the Brin story differs in many ways from the Haber, the juxtaposition of the two stories brings out their similarities. The editors describe the two stories as being about, "two very different plagues," when in fact, with the alteration of a few minor points of exposition, this pair of stories could be about the same plague seen from two different angles. The emotional tones of both are not entirely convincing and, at times, unsuitable to the subject matter and situation. Both stories conclude with the protagonist either having or not having a non-lethal, behavior-changing plague that, in the end, we don't really care whether he or she has.

Neither story is as powerful or direct as Samuel R. Delany's "The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals" (published by Bantam Spectra in 1985), in part because neither story looks its implied subject matter—AIDS—squarely in the eye, as the Delany story does. When set side by side, both of these stories seem to seek to escape from the reality of AIDS, metaphorically weakening the virus by portraying their plagues as non-lethal, possibly curable, and causing something like mid-life crisis or altruism. The possible implication of these stories, reinforced by juxtaposition, is that AIDS improves people's behavior people have stopped sleeping around like they used to. Neither story benefited by its placement next to the other.

At 42 pages, Mike McQuay's "RE: Generations" is the longest piece in the book. About an orderly society's descent into chaos, its apocalypse is awfully well-mannered, linked to a few indicators—some mass suicides (ever so much shorter than Jonestown), a few East bloc style consumer products shortages. The story does not even approach the vividness of the apocalypse in Gwyneth Jones's recent novel *Kalbar*, or to the richness and complexity of some older works on similar themes like *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* by Philip K. Dick, or "The Subliminal Man" by J. G. Ballard.

McQuay's line-by-line writing is bland:

"Just get on with it," Dover said.

"All right," MacKlin said in a professional tone. "Do you know what my exact job is with the company station?" (p. 142)

This isn't the flat affect of Philip K. Dick's prose, or of J. G. Ballard's, which imply a depressive or schizophrenic world. McQuay's prose style simply bores. McQuay's story, a competent enough piece of work, might have been the best story in a weak magazine issue, but a pale imitation of Philip K. Dick's and J. G. Ballard's work of more than a decade ago hardly belongs in an anthology that represents its contents as the state of the art.

In Steven Spruill's story "Silver," a gorilla in one of those communication-with-primates experiments gets its brain operated on and wakes up to discover that it is a reincarnation of Judas Iscariot. The experimenter turns out to be Jesus reincarnated, and his assistant turns out to be the second coming of Mary Magdalene. I won't give away the punch line, except to say that it is equally stunning. One wonders what Howard Waldrop or John Sladek or Neil Barrett could have done with this idea. Unfortunately, Spruill made the mistake of trying to use this concept seriously.

The story bears a rather crude resemblance to Pat Murphy's "Rachel in Love." Perhaps that is the part of the spectrum "Silver" is intended to represent—science fiction stories about apes.

Although "Barbara Hutton Toujours" by Gay Farrington Terry

does not engender the kind of estrangement the story seems to attempt, it features a nicely done setting and is fairly well written. It does not measure up to the quality of past stories along similar lines; the competition is pretty tough. Most strongly reminiscent of Joe Haldeman's "Lindsay and the Red-City Blues," it's one of those stories about American or British travelers or expatriates who have gone abroad, often to a third world country, to escape emotional difficulties at home and who have strange or unpleasant, and ultimately fantastically horrifying adventures abroad. It is part of that subgenre that includes Dennis Eicholson's "The Dark Country," Thomas M. Disch's "The Asian Shore," Clive Barker's "In the Hills, the Cities," Robert Aickman's "Never Visit Venice," or "The Wine-Dark Sea" and just about all of the Aickman stories set in foreign countries, or indeed much of Lucius Shepard's work. One wonders then, reading the editors' introduction to the story, what they might have intended by the remark that the story "... has little in common with much that has been published before" (p. 255). This is puzzling—what have they read?

"The Gamenaker" by Carolyn Ives Gilman has, sentence by sentence, a lot of nice writing—psychological observation like "Gloria disapproved of her guests just enough to make their company pleasant" (p. 269). But the transparently-obvious marketing reason for buying this story is that it glorifies fantasy role playing: "She was no longer Gloria Callader, unassuming widow and gracious hostess. She was Torquin Vangelist, the commanding character she had devised" (p. 275). Like *Enders's Game* by Orson Scott Card, the story suggests that gaming has real world effects and importance. While not an inherently evil message, it has a disproportionate appeal to the readers who play fantasy role-playing games, flattering them, telling them what they would like to (but are otherwise too smart to) believe about themselves.

"Close to the Light" by Charles Oberndorf would have benefitted from the deletion of all obvious references to science fiction—particularly the naming of space ships after living authors. By humorously invoking *sf* as the motivating force behind career choices of the protagonist (named Kathrine), the author congratulates the readers on how smart they are to read *sf*—desperately trying to make us like his story. More significantly, the story need not have taken place in the future, nor need it have been *sf*. While the *sf* elements do serve to exaggerate Kathrine's choice between her family and her career, a number of currently existing professions would put her in a similar predicament.

After a while it becomes apparent how stories make it into a Full Spectrum anthology. This is Hi-Fashion *SF*—making the Full Spectrum series a sort of *Vogue Magazine* of the field. Thirteen out of 27 of the stories in the book are written in the difficult-to-manage first person, two of which are partially in the second person—about as easy to manage as six-inch high heels. Cheap stylistic tricks, often non-functional, abound here—the mini skirts and platform shoes of the genre. The only stories with any apparent relation to the core of the *sf* field, hard *sf*, involve trendy science like quantum mechanics or fractals. So ... if you want to sell a story to *Full Spectrum 3*, you should write a brief slice of life in which nothing happens, particularly nothing fantastic, in the second person (or, if you absolutely must write in the third person, use the present tense), involving the metaphorical implications of some really hip science like superspreading theory, be sure to throw in some magic realism because, as Michael Dirda put it:

Call a writer a magic realist and the Nobel Prize committee will start checking his books out from the Stockholm library, but whisper that the same author produces science fiction and fantasy, and the wide, wide world of serious literature will yawn and look the other way (April 30, 1989 issue of *The Washington Post Book World*, p. 9).

What are you waiting for? Switch on your computer and go to it! Or perhaps not. We may be writing something else next season.

#### Metatype!

Assume that every book has a purpose, and then attempt to

determine *Full Spectrum 2's* purpose. The Full Spectrum series's rhetoric claims that it provides a full spectrum of the work on the cutting edge of the field. We can see from the stories themselves that high quality fiction occupies—at most—only a third of the page space. Less innovative newer writers occupy a significant amount of the remaining page space. While, historically speaking, innovation in the science fiction and fantasy fields comes, in part, from newer writers (all major writers had to be new writers at some point), it is my experience editing original anthologies and reading slush that the most innovative stories one receives in the mail are usually the work of established writers, and the least innovative are often those by newer writers. With a few exceptions, my experience is borne out by what the editors of *Full Spectrum 2* have chosen to publish. Are they are trying for the same sort of public praise that A. J. Budrys receives for his work on the *Writers of the Future* contest and anthologies (without the accompanying stigma of being connected to the Church of Scientology)?

*Full Spectrum 2* does not contain the full spectrum of literary modes in the science fiction and fantasy field, nor does it contain the full spectrum of literary modes on the field's cutting edge. Rather, it contains a nearly full spectrum of the marketing signals that *S/F* seems interested in using. The Full Spectrum series is integral to the image-making of the *S/F* lines, Bantam Spectra and Doubleday Foundation, and we must understand its marketing signals not only in the context of how they help sell the anthology series, but more importantly how they help sell *S/F's* other titles. A few marketing approaches—movie tie-ins, Tolkienesque fantasy trilogies, and Choose-Your-Own-Adventure novels—are not included because of the nature of the forms. But the editors have covered virtually all the rest. And form follows function.

The anthology's introduction, written by co-editor Lou Aronica, is a manifesto of *S/F's* marketing approach, through which Aronica seems to have invented the new post-modern, self-referential literary form of metatype—type whose primary function is to hype the writer's previous hype. One mitigating factor is that, according to conventional wisdom, no one reads introductions anyway. In this case, that bit of conventional wisdom makes me happy:

Scenes on the road from *Full Spectrum* to *Full Spectrum 2*:

Toward the beginning of 1988, we came to the decision that we needed to find a somewhat different form of print advertising for certain types of books we were publishing. We... devised "The Team Spectra Report," a chatty, behind-the-scenes open letter to the readers... I thought it was the best ad I'd ever written. In fact, given my postuniversality output, I thought it was the best writing of any kind I had done in nearly a decade (p. ix).

Although Judy-Lynn Del Rey used her anti-aesthetic marketing rhetoric for the most part to indoctrinate her sales force during the peak time of her line's success in the 1980s, the stunning thing about Aronica's approach is that he takes his marketing philosophy to the readers. He goes on to present his lack of an aesthetic agenda as a virtue:

*Full Spectrum* wasn't strictly a science fiction anthology any more than it was a fantasy anthology. In fact there were a couple of stories that barely had anything fantastic going on in them at all. To some who have been defining and redefining the genre for several decades... I can imagine that reading the book could be a bit of a jarring experience... We weren't getting with the program... We weren't trying to be revolutionary in *Full Spectrum* and we're certainly not trying to be revolutionary here (p. ix).

His denial of any revolutionary intent seems to me disingenuous. He is not playing a merely neutral Terry Carr opposite other anthologists' vocally polemical Judith Merril. Carr's and Merril's stances as anthologists were both based upon having taken sides (or specifically suspended judgment) on aesthetic issues surrounding the history and development of the field. Aronica rejects the necessity of aesthetics, even when dealing with the works of the best authors in the field. This is a revolutionary stance.

Aronica's revolution is his attempt to bravely rescue the field from the treacherous and turbulent waters of aesthetics, dry it off with a warm, fluffy towel, and set it safely on the firm green ground of marketing principles, garnering through his heroism respectability for

the Spectra/Foundation marketing signals and beyond that—establishing whatever he chooses to push at the time as the cutting edge of science fiction and fantasy. As for me . . . well, I would rather not be rescued. ▲

The

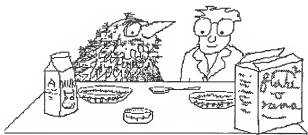
## New York Review of Science Fiction

There we were in the Hartwells' editorial kitchen, nursing our hangovers and our bloated bellies full of Mexican beef of questionable origin, searching for new ways of bringing you the most eye-opening, mouth-watering, show-stopping, chart-topping, bomb-dropping book reviews and wondering how far we could stretch one over-exuberant sentence breathlessly, when David's cat Sox leapt onto my lap.

As though smitten by my muse, I exclaimed, "I've got it! Why don't we pledge to our beloved readers that if we ever publish *one* review or article that's not the best *ever*, we will promptly eat David's cat raw!"

Susan gagged at the idea of cat tartare—or, perhaps, at our rhetoric—but she quickly realized how slam-bang, sure-fire our pledge was and joined the rest of the team in taking this stand.

So if you're ever in Pleasantville, be sure to come by and play with David's cats: they'll be here for a *long* time.



Art by Daniel M. Pinkwater

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## Phases of Gravity by Dan Simmons

New York: Bantam Books, 1989; \$4.50 pb; 278 pp.

reviewed by Gordon Van Gelder

Everywhere we go, all day long, about one g of gravity pulls at us. While we sleep, while we eat, while we put our pants on one gravity-ridden leg at a time. Wouldn't it be nice to escape for a while?

Richard Baedecker did. In 1972, he and Dave Muldrew kicked up the dust in the light gravity of the moon. Now it's 1988 and the former astronaut is experiencing an earthly phenomenon known as mid-life crisis. He's divorced from his wife, he has quit his job, his estranged son now follows the teachings of an Indian guru, and life in general is a drag. Welcome to Earth.

Baedecker begins an odyssey the goal of which seems to be escaping Earth, getting out of gravity's steady pull, flying once again—even if just for a little while. He flies first to India in hopes of seeing his son Scott, but Scott is preoccupied with his Indian spiritual exercises; instead, Scott's free-spirited friend Maggie Brown shows Baedecker around the country. She states portentously the "theme" of the book: "I think some places have a power of their own. . . . Sometimes I think that we spend our whole lives on a pilgrimage to find places like that" (p. 23). Baedecker embarks on just such a journey.

This odyssey doesn't summarize well because much of Baedecker's pilgrimage consists of recalling the past, while the events he experiences in the present—camping with and visiting friends, touring the new space shuttle, experiencing various sites of power—sound more trite than they are. They are trite, but their strength lies in the heartfelt characters and in the graceful interweaving of past and present that bring Baedecker to a successful reappraisal of his life on Earth.

Everywhere we go, all day long, some force other than gravity pulls at us time. Twenty-four hours a day, we grow older. Wouldn't it be nice to get away for a while?

Simmons uses this metaphor—gravity as time—with a slightly heavy hand but to great effect. The novel slowly, insistently builds up until we stop seeing Baedecker as a self-pitying old man and care for him and for his friends. The book bogs down in parts, is giddy in spots, yet is very moving overall. The technological details are convincing, the themes are examined well, and the final third of the book is

wonderful; I really enjoyed sharing Baedecker's growth. *Phases of Gravity* falls somewhere between the mysticism of Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey and the realism of Wolfe's *The Right Stuff*, but I think all three works share an attention to the bonds formed beyond gravity's pull, the links between man and space, and the links among all mankind.

At first, the book's attitude towards women bothered me because the structure was so very familiar: older man revitalized by the young, mysterious, attractive woman he cannot control. Baedecker doesn't seem to realize the obvious fact that Maggie Brown is actually the "place of power" he seeks. I was even bothered by the fact that men are referred to by their last names, women by their first names.

But I couldn't understand why it bothered me that Maggie should be the goal of Baedecker's odyssey. I'll aver gladly that we pass our lives in search of people of power. Not until I reached the heart of the book did I understand what irritated me: Maggie simply never takes on a life of her own in the story; she comes and goes as the text requires of her, flitting in and out of Baedecker's life in order to suit the plot—her own motivations never really convince me, perhaps because they're left unexplored.

This story is a man's story, what I would term "men's fiction." It abounds in scenes of father and son, son and father, and man and man. There's lots of amiable drinking, good of reminiscing, and outdoorsy camaraderie. There are lots of high-technology toys with which to play, gliders and Hueys and rocket ships. Man's best friend also rears his head and wags his tail throughout the book—very effectively, too; *Phases of Gravity* radiates the generous warmth of a boy's love for a puppy. Yes, the female characters are more effective in the ideal sense than in their actual scenes—Maggie's presence is far more powerful when she's off-stage, and Baedecker's ex-wife never speaks a word—but that is not where the book's strength lies. This book is sincere and moving and if Simmons makes one antiquated assumption—that the women will be waiting when the men return to Earth—it's made with the simple open-heartedness of a true romantic. A guy's hug exerts a lot more force than just one g. ▶

Jessica Amanda Salmonson

## Gender Structuring of Shell Persons in *The Ship Who Sang*

Introduction: Mores, Militarism and Inequality

Anne McCaffrey created a marvelous work of fiction in *The Ship Who Sang* (Ballantine, 1970), a collection of connected short stories about a human whose brain has been implanted into a starship. The author has taken for granted the historical perspective of a future that is curious for reasons perhaps not intended. Although the reader is never handed the history lesson that the people of her book would have as common knowledge, we are aware of a planets-wide civilization with traditions dating back to the 20th century. Indeed, the future history seems to begin with our century, as there are no references to anything prior to the 1960s, except Shakespeare.

There is considerable evidence of 20th century mores at work in McCaffrey's future. The major governmental/militaristic organization we see is Central Worlds Service, whose leadership, organization, image and traditions ("archaic whimsies," p. 234) seem to be those of today's Marine Corps.

That this conservative, powerful agency of necessity reflects the precise attitudes of non-service citizens and individual planetary governments is doubtful, just as the present-day Marines do not necessarily reflect the mood of non-military groups and individuals. Yet there are clues that 20th century mentality dominates elsewhere. When we are introduced to a shell-person who is the equivalent of a city mayor, his concerns are merely capitalistic, his value system is right out of mid-1900s middle America. Elsewhere, "Dylanizing" (p. 68) is

described as a futuristic concept of protest through emotional song. Since Dylan was not the first (nor, help us, last or best) minstrel commentator, this is the strongest clue that 20th century and specifically 1960s ideologies shape McCaffrey's future. It further reflects how most history prior to the 20th century is inconsequential or lost in this portrait of the future.

There is no equality between the sexes, let alone between races or species. We do see women in a few positions of power, as today. There is an extreme lack of balance in this regard, however, as today. The career women we see are in Central World Services, exactly equivalent to present-day opportunities for women in the armed services, with the same drawbacks.

One woman, Kira, is a skilled professional in human embryology, given a major assignment of transporting embryos to a sterilized planet. She is herself a child: "Her voice was breathless, like a child's" (p. 65), with long braids and childlike mannerisms. The protagonist feels a "twinge of regret that her partner was feminine" (p. 61), and sees her as "too fragile and young for her responsibilities." That the first impression proves inaccurate is beside the point. The preconception wouldn't exist in a society that valued women as highly as men. Kira, we're told, achieved her position only because her occupation is regarded as a woman's field; fetal children are a woman's business. The protagonist observes, "Central Worlds might be relying on her maternal instinct as additional insurance for the mission." McCaffrey's future believes men lack parental abilities inherent in women.

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We don't see women in the highest positions of power, except in a matriarchal society (p. 18) depicted as religious fanatics worshipping a male deity (unlikely for a matriarchy) and fundamentally irrational.

It could be argued that 20th century ideology is firmly rooted in McCaffrey's book because McCaffrey wrote it in the 20th century and is incapable of stepping far enough outside her own culture to depict anything altered by time. If this is to be our general stance regarding authors of science fiction, then it follows that science fiction is never futuristic; visions of the future do not exist in science fiction. It can additionally be inferred that any work predating the mid-1970s boom in feminist science fiction is more apt to be backward in its images of women, making McCaffrey's book an example of transitional science fiction bridging masculine pulp sf to feminist authors of the middle and late '70s. However, the intention of this essay is to evaluate the attitudes of Central Worlds as though it were an accurate portrayal of a militaristic organization actually existing in the future.

#### Gender Relationships of Brawns and Brainships

The central character of this patchwork novel is Helva, a "brainship." Born monstrously deformed, her parents opted against euthanasia and donated their infant to Central Worlds to salvage the infant's brain. This is not morally different from selling children into slavery or prostitution, but they presumably do not become slaves, due more to organizations that protect the rights of sentient beings than to Central Worlds' attitudes.

The infants are conditioned to life within a "shell" that allows them certain extraordinary powers. Shell persons have many opportunities that "normal" people do not. Never having had the use of biological bodies, they do not feel disoriented by their shell-bodies.

Shell persons are structured—physically and emotionally—by Central Worlds, for a fee. That fee is later paid off by service in Central Worlds. After this period of indentured servitude, the shell person is free to contract her or his talents and services to private enterprises.

The loftiest position for a shell person to become is a brainship. Helva has a sleek, powerful space vehicle for a body. Although people with natural bodies are often horrified by the thought of a dwarfed, useless body and highly intelligent brain at the center of a magnificent ship, most recognize the adventure and excitement of being a ship capable of traveling to alien worlds at will.

Rigorous emotional and psychological structuring is necessary, as brainships have enormous power, enough to wreck worlds were they to become psychotic. They are raised never to question their own humanity, conditioning aimed at providing them healthy outlooks. Unfortunately, Central Worlds, being inordinately conservative, implants numerous attitudes that are less individually-oriented than would be optimal for emotional health and socialization. Ironically ships like Helva, who overcome a small degree of Central Worlds' conservatism, end up the best ships in the service.

Some conditioning is self-serving for Central Worlds, such as insuring a zealousness that makes brainships apt to remain in Service after they've paid off their indenture. All conditioning is undertaken from the 20th-century idea of normality.

The most curious thing Central Worlds does is assign gender to shell persons. There is no indication whether this is done randomly, or according to the chromosomal sex of the non-functional bodies encasing the brains. There are three reasons to suppose that it is done randomly, with a decided preference for female genderization in the subversive sense as well as broader role-modeling. First, in the case of severe birth defects like Helva's, even chromosomal sex may be in question. Second, there are more female brainships, manned by more "brawns" (mobile human units) who are generally men. This tallies with present-day inclinations to think of sailing vessels as "she" and women as objects. Brawns are highly possessive toward their ships as well. It appears as though Central Worlds values female gender structuring for brainships because women can be "possessed." The third consideration is that shell persons would be naturally genderless, and any gender assigned them is arbitrary even if it coincidentally matched chromosomal sex.

It is established in the book that gender voice patterns are assigned, or chosen, arbitrarily. Helva has a distinct, personal, archly

feminine voice. Yet she admits, "since my voice is reproduced through audio units, I can select the one proper for the voice register required" (p. 119). This ability comes in handy at various times in the story, but she always reverts to her "personal" voice afterward.

There are many reasons why Central Worlds would assign gender, and shape shell persons artificially as their personalities mature. The most defensible reason is that in a society that is itself rigidly dichotomized, which would or might be horrified by and depersonalize a human being who is physically a machine, it is necessary to maximize the human qualities of a shell person in the most obvious and prosaic manner possible.

Shell persons are aware of other people's suppressed attitudes. "Very few people she had met, Helva admitted sadly, thought of her as Helva, a person, a thinking, feeling, rational, intelligent, eminently human being."

The "public" attitude is evident even in the brawns, who are highly trained and would theoretically know better. The most overt evidence of bias among brawns is that they tend to talk to the titanium column encasing the useless dwarfed body, failing to recognize the ship *per se* as the shell person's body. Shell persons' rudimentary biological bodies are superfluous; they are maintained at infant size so as never to outgrow their shells. Yet one character hugs the titanium column though it is devoid of sensation and incapable of response. Brawns cannot completely accept the humanity of the ship. The unseen dwarf drifting blind and fetal behind a wall they can almost accept. I say "almost" because the self-image of the brainship is neither of being a sentient spaceship, nor of a blind fetus; brawns and brainships alike believe in an idealized woman, a fact that triggers psychotic behavior in a number of characters in the book.

Jenna, Helva's first brawn, invents an image of her that Helva comes to accept: "I fancy blondes with long tresses," and admires her for her "sweetness" (p. 14). Another character, while accepting Helva as a woman, tells her she is "a beautiful thing" (p. 8). And she proudly realizes the competitive brawns are "all quite willing to do each other dirt to get possession of her" (p. 9, stress added).

It restricts shell persons to be assigned gender traits and attitudes, cut off from all opposing attributes and presumptive capabilities that do not belong to a narrowly defined female-ness. But it is better to be an "it" and depersonalized by the biases of a society that limits itself in the same manner, and considers their conditioned attitudes natural.

There are terrible ramifications in assigning gender to a genderless being. McCaffrey does not deal with many of these ramifications, but some of them provide the highest moments of drama when she depicts the ways in which gender structuring leads to various kinds of insanity.

The most trouble stems from interpersonal power situations between male brawns (possessive and competitive) and brainships assigned feminine characteristics. One overbearing brawn makes Helva react "more and more on the emotional than the reasonable level" (p. 173), has her inaccurately doubting her own sanity (p. 176), and gets them into a bad situation because, as Helva describes it, "if she had countermanded his order, he would have been in the right to call her down. But since he had taken the initiative, naturally all was in order" (p. 182). He sees her as being one part mere woman, and two parts fallible machine—never a fully capable, let alone superior, human individual.

By cultural definition, it is necessary for the female to become dependent on the male. Helva believes and accepts that she "was conditioned for a partner, for someone to take care of, to do for, to live with" (p. 101). The years in space together make brawn and brainship equivalent to husband and wife, although sexual relations are impossible for the shell person and it is expected that brawns will seek sexual outlets in port (p. 235), analogous to the frigid housewife whose husband is justified in seeking prostitutes. It is analogous also to the backward sentiment that "good" women are virgins and "good" men are not, heightening the merits of brawn/brainship romances.

The fact that the brainship is herself the senior officer, officially the higher authority, and literally the greater strength is overridden by the emotional dependencies she acquires on her brawn. Dependence can become so intense that separation induces psychosis. Brainships' life spans are immense. Brawns live normal life spans. It is, at best, a

trauma to find oneself without the person upon whom one has been emotionally reliant. Occasionally brainships vanish, and there are many legends about what becomes of them. Their grief at losing virtual husbands is so overwhelming they simply never return to home port. They wander the edge of the galaxy until they die; they commit suicide in the heart of a sun, or they go mad.

Helva discovers a lost ship who has become psychotic with grief and must be destroyed (p. 88). In essence she has taken control of a planet and created a horror-story environment in memory of her dead brawn. It is a grim, sorrowful part of the book, told powerfully, as macabre a piece of science fiction as has ever been written.

Earlier in the tale, Helva also loses a brawn (p. 21), a man with whom she has "fallen in love." She was strong enough to survive, unlike the psychotic brainship she was forced to destroy. But the pain was at times nearly crippling, when it needn't have been had she been allowed by Central Worlds to develop as a more self-reliant individual less absorbed by romance-novel ideals of love. There is evidence in the story of other brainships suffering identical crises, as a rule rather than exception, as the natural outgrowth of gender structuring, causing Central Worlds to lose some ships altogether.

Interpersonal relationships between male brawn and male brainships, between female and females, and between male brainships and female brawns, are not explored. The possibility of brainships acquiring attractions to other brainships, and "eloping" across the galaxy with no brawns whatsoever, is never dealt with even marginally, though this would be the most logical development. Attachments would be very likely between people sharing much in common, including the commonalities of long life spans and steel physiques. Possibly Central Worlds' rearing programs include conditioned aversions to such attachments, although such an aversion to one's own kind would lead to self-esteem problems for all shell persons.

When ships get together, they share little more than gossip (p. 52). Although Helva seems to have a vaguely mother-daughter relationship with an older ship, ships mainly pour their emotional energy into brawns and relate to other ships in sewing-bee fashion, scarcely respecting one another, as indicated when Helva feels of another ship, "she knew from past experience the voids in the other's personality" (p. 53). The conditioning of shell persons may be such that they cannot seriously consider attachment to their own "race" and this would have an emotional impact more damaging than the novel conveys.

Helva does have two women brawns during the novel's duration, but only as expected transients, of whom, "Theoda had been too immersed in her life-long exploitation to entertain a personal reaction to Helva. And although Kira had been with her over three years, neither of them had let friendship develop into deep attachment." One would rather suppose female brawns with female brainships could develop close, intense, loving friendships without the sexually frustrated "love-romance" that dooms many brainships. But it appears as though the artificial boundaries, definitions, and conditioning of "gender" as structured by Central Worlds raises barriers between women as well as setting power trips between genders. Ideal, equal relationships are never an option.

Male brainships are hardly glimpsed. The one exception is depicted as effeminate, such traits given as negative: gossip, complaining. His brawn relationship might have been curious indeed, but was not explored. Male brawns fit a specific image Central Worlds deems valuable: handsome, tall, white. It is never stated whether the effeminate brainship is an exception; he may be typical, with Central Worlds role-structuring for "butch and femme" homosexual pairing imitating the power structures of male/female pairings. Yet there is nowhere an indication that homosexuality is condoned by Central Worlds, even in celibate terms, and it is more likely that male-gendered brainships are structured to the same "norm" as male brawns: strong-willed, masculine, possessive, aggressive—then assigned female brawns when possible, leading to brawn inability to function under overbearing, possessive, and exceedingly powerful brainships, ultimately reinforcing Central Worlds' sense that female brainships with male brawns is best. Similarly, though male brainships could legally choose male brawns, these would be too competitive to be entirely effective, although on temporary assignment they might become excellent buddies in a parody of male bonding.

Although there is no official pressure for ships to mate with the opposite gender, and they often team up with same-gendered brawns for temporary assignments, long-term brawn/brainship partnerships are male/female in all cases shown.

Each of Helva's female brawns were temporary. Some of the things Service personnel take for granted is revealing. "You and Jennan made a fine team. His death was a piece of rotten luck. Let him rest in peace. Find yourself another guy..." (p. 204). It was no coincidence, then, that Helva's female brawns were stopgaps between men to fill the vacancy permanently. Clearly female space pilots would have a bigger of a time advancing in their careers under such constraints.

The two long-term brawns (Helva's first and final in the book) were men. A third was *intended* as long term and was also male (chosen by Helva for his perfect masculinity, although he turned out to be a rotten guy inside). So of three male brawns, all were expected to be long-term, and of two female brawns, both were expected to move on soon.

Gender structuring and attitude conditioning is such that heterosexual role-playing and power-dynamics are the most satisfying to the programmed individuals. Therefore, though they are not depicted, it seems inevitable that female brawns must find their permanent assignments with male brainships, though these are rare. Male brainships are less common, and female brawns are less common. Perhaps subconsciously, but more likely by design, Central Worlds is causing one kind of pairing to remain the *de facto* norm.

Since either brawns or brainships could conceivably overcome the role structuring that society (for brawns) and Central Worlds (for shells) imposes, there ought to be exceptional cases. McCaffrey shows none.

The close of the book finds Helva vying for a partner who is too small to fit the Service "image." It is not because she had learned (from a villainous ultra-masculine brawn) that the power roles have been crippling her. Indeed, she continues to believe if she could again achieve the dependent relationship she had with her first brawn, her life would again have meaning.

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Her choice is a small man, but one of immense ego, who feels exaggeratedly possessive of her, who has been madly in love with her for years. He reveals that he knows how to get inside her titanium column, and intends to open it so he can hold her beautiful body in his arms, although objectively he knows that to open the shell would kill the person inside. Helva never realizes her humanity is twice denied. This man does not see her as a person who is a ship; nor does he see her as a dwarf inside a ship. Instead, she is perfect beauty as epitomized by a pin-up girl, which has been Central Worlds' map for gender structuring! Helva is viewed only as what someone else blindly pretends she is, which is something she can never be. She wishes that she could be "tangible for him, to be used by him, able to experience that ultimate gift of self" (p. 240). "It would be better for me to die at your hands than remain an inviolate virgin without you" (p. 229), a melodrama that values rape-murder very highly.

Helva may mean what she says, but she says it primarily to shock the man who wants her. They are both vulnerable in their admissions. She believes that if he will ever violate her column, he will do it in that moment of mutual vulnerability, and she will die happily in his arms. If he doesn't do it in that moment, he never will, and they will become the best team the Service ever owned. She still believes the gender roles are of paramount importance, though it is never rationalized how

persistent flirtation with psychosis leads to superior teamwork.

## Conclusion

The view of this analyst is that gender structuring of shell persons is, when considering the society's attitudes, a necessary evil. A brainship free of gender restrictions would be considered less human. But the necessity of the structuring is confessed only in terms of how the individual survives in a dangerously flawed society.

The imposition of these exaggerated gender traits carries with it many grave risks that endanger the welfare of brainship, brawn, and—given the power of each ship—entire planets. The side-effects can lead to murderous psychosis for either brawn (as in the case of the man who wanted to rip the dwarfed fetus out of the titanium column) or brainship (as in the case of the grieving creator of a death-world), with the power to wreck planets always waiting for one, the other, or both. Central Worlds' propaganda program, and the capitalistic rewards for the societies endangered, must be awesome for governments to allow so much power to move freely amidst the planets with no more stability than the average heterosexual marriage. ▴

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## Kathryn Cramer Escher in Eifland: Logic, Fantasy & Criticism

Part 2 of 2

### Logic as Protective Coloration

For nearly as long as there has been fantasy literature, there has been third rate fantasy. And since the 19th century, the defense of fantasy based upon logic and reason has tended to establish rules for fantasy writers based upon subjective standards and loose usages of logic and rationality. This is not just a recent idea, peculiar to World Fantasy Convention panels. Often, the initial defensiveness falls away, and only rules based on plausibility remain which defend fantasy not merely from outside criticism, but also from creative freedom:

The imagination in us, whose exercise is essential to the most temporary submission to the imagination of another, immediately, with the disappearance of Law, ceases to act. Suppose the gracious creature of some childlike region of Fairyland talking either cockney or Gascon! Would not the tale, however lovelily begun, sink at once to the level of Burlesque—of all forms of literature, the least worthy? (George MacDonald, "The Fantastic Imagination")

In fact, contrary to MacDonald's expectation, there are a number of exceptions to his example. Horace Walpole's *The King and His Three Daughters*,\* one of Walpole's Hieroglyphic Tales, features a princess with a strong Yorkshire dialect. The dragon in Edith Nesbit's *The Last of the Dragons* has a cockney accent. And the accents of the characters diminishes neither tale. In fact both stories are improved, despite this contravention of Law.

More to the point and usually more precise are the criticisms levelled at those works which fail to live up to the standards of world building. In Joanna Russ's parody of Stephen Donaldson's *Thomas Covenant* books, *"Dragons and Dimwits"* (which concludes with the story's heroine discovering food) the hero, Thomas, points out the conspicuous absence of meals: "... by Saint Marx, and Saint Engels," said Thomas, "and by Saint Common Sense, I declare that neither thou nor thy people eatest or drinkest in the least (for I have never seen them do it) but subsisteth upon fancies and fooleries imagined out of thin air" (Russ, *Zanibar Gail* [paperback edition, but not in the hardcover] p. 202). Kathryn Hume criticizes Tolkien on similar grounds:

The Shire is not economically viable. It reflects a child's understanding of the world: food is delivered, put into the

pantry, and eaten, but not paid for. The labor going into its production and the problems of isolated agricultural communities are ignored (Hume, p. 47).

Although these criticisms are certainly well taken, it is important to ask whether the Donaldson books would be greatly improved by the occasional description of a snack or banquet or whether *The Hobbit* would be improved by an additional chapter explaining the economy of the Shire: *money grows on trees, the seeds of which are widely available and are scattered by the wind*. One must conclude that the answer is no to both of these.

Nonetheless, criticism on this level has profoundly influenced writers' relationships with their audience and inside the literature itself. For several years in the 1980s, it was all too common for panels on world building—staffed by fantasy and science fiction writers and by scientists of various descriptions—to crop up on the convention programs. Writers were known to bring along maps as big as bed sheets to prove that they had done their homework and, implicitly, that their books must therefore be good.

World building and the rise of fantasy role-playing games affect one another synergistically: books containing built worlds became even more popular since the 1970s because the gaming/reading audience can use the worlds of these books for further gaming. And that segment of the reading audience which was introduced to fantasy literature through gaming appreciates any 'good' world building an author may accomplish and, correspondingly, often scorns books for which the author has declined to provide a thoroughly-built world. (See John M. Ford's articulate negative review of Terry Bisson's *Fire on the Mountain*, *NYRSE*, issue #3.)

Taking advantage of this situation, game manufacturers and book publishers have begun publishing novels based on fantasy role-playing games. (The *Dragonlance* books, for example, or books like *City of Hawks* by Gary Gygax from the *Gond the Rogue*™ series. Any book with a trademark squib on the cover is almost certainly of this type.) This leads, perhaps inevitably, to the commercial recycling of the worlds of famous books and stories both in fantasy and science fiction: Gregory Benford was commissioned to write a sequel to a famous Arthur C. Clarke novel, and so on. World building pursued as an end in itself becomes an enterprise riddled with formulaic strategies which contribute little or nothing to improving the quality of fantasy literature.

Fantasy and science fantasy literature is riddled with examples of world building where it need not be. One of the most influential prototypes for this variety of fantasy is Anne McCaffrey's *Dragonsiders* of *Perrin*™ series. (Because of the economic climate in which fantasy and science fiction today exist, and because some of the game rights have been licensed on the series, McCaffrey's attorney has recently had that three word combination trademarked.) The initial reason for scientifically rationalizing a world which was to be the setting for stories about dragons was, one gathers, quite different from that of writers starting out today and one can certainly argue that in the case of McCaffrey's books the world building does contribute to the rest of the book. McCaffrey, although often regarded as a fantasy writer, considers herself a science fiction writer and happily points out that the editor who acquired and published the initial dragon stories was John W. Campbell who was known, despite his lapses in favor of dianetics, ESP, etc., for his high standards of scientific veracity.

But McCaffrey's success has led to unthinking adherence to the principles of world building. A recent example of a good story which contains needless world building is Patricia McKillip's "The Harrowing of the Dragon of Hoarsbreath," which begins with a discussion of how the planet on which the story is set has several suns and describes their respective orbits. While the seasons of the year which correspond to these orbits do play a role in the story, there is no aesthetic reason why the cycle of these seasons could not simply be asserted. Writers have used worldbuilding as protective coloration—not for aesthetic reasons.

### *A Cage for Freedom*

Like world building, characterization and plotting are intimately entwined with style, emerging from the imagery, setting and line-by-line choice of words. While one can point to specific sentences which contain characterization, the process of determining whether characters behave "logically" is perhaps one of the least verifiable of the judgments that can be made about a work of fiction.

While logic must certainly play a part in determining that characterization is unrealistic, is this determination easily reached by logic alone? No.

The use of the word 'logic' in the context of characterization implies that authors' solutions to artistic problems are objectively verifiable as correct and that those solutions are external to the writer. By using the word 'logic' to describe the process of arriving at realistic characterization one represses the true process. Each person likes to think his or her own behavior logical—and, if not logical, certainly rational. However, it's perfectly clear that other people often behave illogically, and that no one behaves logically all the time.

All these sets of rules for fantasy are pursued in the name of quality. It seems that in order to be good, a fantasy must have a well-built world, be written in a consistent style and the characters must behave logically (and not have cockney or other low-class accents) and so on. These rules have not produced a large body of wonderful fiction which adheres to them. Instead, because most of the 'rules' for fantasy lend themselves to formula, by establishing rules, we build a container for fantasy—and just as though we'd built a cage to keep freedom in—once we've built it, that which it was to contain is not inside. Instead of good fantasy, what we find inside are mediocre, formulaic, undistinguished fantasy novels, trilogies, and series.

The metaphorical and artistic coherence of a work exists as a relationship between the reader and the text and is therefore far less subject to formula than are other aspects of fantasy discussed above. And many of the above formulae have been pursued at the expense of metaphor.

### *The Literal and Metaphor*

As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson wrote in their book *Metaphors We Live By*, "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (p. 5). They further explain, "... metaphor is not just a matter of language, that is, of mere words. . . . On the contrary, human thought processes are largely metaphorical. . . . Metaphors as linguistic expression are possible

precisely because there are metaphors in a person's conceptual system" (p. 6).

One can take something literally and, simultaneously, metaphorically. A non-fiction example is the conceptual structure of particle theory and quantum mechanics. How can an electron or a photon simultaneously be a particle and a wave? Of this variety of conceptual problem, Werner Heisenberg said:

According to our customary intuition [we attributed to electrons] the same sort of reality as the objects of our daily world. . . . In the course of time this representation has proved to be false [because] the electron and atom possess not any degree of physical reality as the objects of daily experience (Arthur I. Miller, *Imagery in Scientific Thought*, p. xix).

To understand properly this kind of physics, one must take it literally—as, in fact, perhaps the most literal of all truths. One keeps in mind that the words and phrases are not equivalent to the reality, but are metaphors—models necessarily much simpler than the reality. Furthermore, should these metaphors come into apparent conflict, as in the wave-particle duality, one should recognize that a paradox implied by metaphors need not be a paradox in fact. Just as physics has an essential level of metaphor, so does fantasy.

A fantasy must be read literally and then understood metaphorically. For instance, "Insomnia" by Horacio Quiroga tells of an insomniac who commits suicide because he can't sleep; and in the last line we find that when he's dead he still can't sleep. In order to read it fully and understand its effect (beyond the obvious fact that dead people can't attain that physiological state called sleep), the story must primarily be taken literally, but also must be understood as metaphorical.

*Bones of the Moon* by Jonathan Carroll features a dream landscape fantasy world, Rondua, considered a fantasy by the characters in the fantastic world of the book's primary frame. Rondua and the events that happen there are literal, but also part of understanding it as a psychological dream landscape.

So long as one understands what to take literally, taking a work literally and understanding it metaphorically don't conflict. In order to gain proper perspective on the metaphorical content of a work of fantasy, one must keep firmly in mind, at all times, that it is intended literally, just as, when one reads a work of non-fantasy fiction, one must keep in mind that appealing and realistic as the details of the story are, they didn't really happen.

### *Symmetries and Conjugate Pairs*

Often the more insistently literal the fantasy text, the more rich and complex are its metaphors. The presence of one half of a conjugate pair hints strongly at the presence of the other half. As Rosemary Jackson points out, "What emerges as the basic trope of fantasy is the *oxymoron*, a figure of speech which holds together contradictions and sustains them in an impossible unity, without progressing toward synthesis" (Jackson, p. 21). The flip-flopping between the conjugate pairs that gives fantasy its effect, gives world building its apparent impact, gives realistic characterization the power to dissociate the reader from the real. These symmetries can often be the key to unlocking meaning. They are cues rather than recipes. But they can often be serve as imaginative tools with which to interpret.

Let us consider Avram Davidson's story "The Woman Who Thought She Could Read," the story of an old woman who can read the future in dried beans. Start with the very title: pairing the nouns with their opposites, woman/man, read/write we come up with *The Man Who Thought He Could Write*, perhaps pointing to the author himself and his uncomfortable relationship to the act of writing and to his reading audience, a story about an author attempting to cope with response to his work: *If that's how you feel, I'll go away and won't ever read/write again*. Davidson makes the stance of the retreating reader/writer very appealing. But disguising the act of writing as a variety of fortune telling by an illiterate old woman of Eastern-European ethnicity, he makes it disreputable, not something worth arguing in favor of—except for her kindness and her hurt feelings and the wonder of it all. By writing the story he shows that in the frame outside the story

## Read This

Recently Read and Recommended by Janet Kagan:

*The Long Orbit*, Mick Farren (del Rey)

Read this for the vivid setting and take note that, as wild as it gets, you can clearly see the trends in today's society that he's extrapolated. (Follow me, sir? Mind the step, now. . .) Also read it for the fully-developed mystery and for the wonderful characterization. Farren tosses off enough ideas along the way to keep a lesser hand in novels for a lifetime. This is a book I'd gladly steal from.

*The Satanic Verses*, Salman Rushdie (Viking)

Don't let other reviews fool you: this is a *fantasy* novel. If you like Lafferty or Hughart, don't miss this one. It's a great sprawling guidebook that leads you all over three countries (and elsewhere) and treats you to the most remarkable sights and incidents. Sheer entertainment while you're reading it. . . but scenes and lines from it will stick in your mind and pop back up with surprising regularity forever after. My subconscious loves to quote bits at me.

*Heatseeker*, John Shirley (Scream/Press)

A rarity these days—a single-author collection. I rationed the stories out over two weeks to make them last longer . . . and to recuperate between them. Even so, it was like riding a roller coaster while somebody fires Roman candles at you—you're too excited to notice how much danger you're in. Worth the price for "Silent Crickets" alone.

*The Idylls of the Queens*, Phyllis Ann Karr (Ace)

A triple threat: an Arthurian fantasy mystery. Not only does the mystery work as a mystery but Karr walks a second tightrope as well—believable magic in an equally believable (sometimes grimly realistic) historical setting.

Not for those who think Arthurian days were an age of chivalry.

*The Story of the Stone*, Barry Hughart (Doubleday Foundation)

If you've read Hughart's *The Bridge of Birds*, I don't have to tell you about this one. If you *haven't* read *The Bridge of Birds*, go read it immediately—then I don't have to tell you about this one.

*Ripper!* edited by Susan Casper and Gardner Dozois (Tor)

I don't ordinarily read horror but if there were more collections like this one I'd change my reading habits. These are psychological horror tales: each and every one goes deeper into true horror than twenty shelf-est of splatter writing. Read this collection to find out what really scares you.

*Agent of Vengeance*, James H. Schmitz (Gnome Press)

Sorry, but I can't restrict my recommendations to recent books. Books are meant to be reread. Will someone *please* bring this back into print for those poor souls who've never had the chance to read "The Truth About Oshages" or "The Second Night of Summer"? (No, I won't lend you my copy. If you didn't return it, I might be forced to obliterate you from the face of the Earth.)

opposites: interior/exterior, magic/powerlessness, male/female. In "Leaf by Niggle" by J. R. R. Tolkien, the fantastic picture painted by the protagonist, Niggle, becomes a paradise to which Niggle and his next door neighbor retire, which represents, in turn, the rich world inside Niggle's mind. As Susan Palwick points out, magic and powerlessness are dual properties of the protagonist, Schmendrick, in Peter Beagle's *The Last Unicorn*. Feminist critics such as Joanna Russ have observed that in fantasy and science fiction, women writers often use masculinity as a distancing device to describe, through a masculine character, the experience of being female.

In general, logic, rationality, order, and realism are used in pursuit of the illogical irrationality, chaos, and surrealism. And vice versa. Fantasy must be logical precisely because it is illogical, realistic because it is unrealistic, rational because it is irrational. As Rosemary Jackson notes, "The etymology of the word 'fantastic' points to an essential ambiguity: it is un-real. . . the fantastic is a special presence, suspended between being and nothingness. It takes the real and breaks it" (Jackson, p. 20). However, there is not mere suspension at work here. Rather there is a back-and-forth motion between the halves of conjugate pairs: the logical in pursuit of the illogical, the impossible in pursuit of the possible, the real in pursuit of the unreal, the irrational in pursuit of the rational. This is the purpose of logic in fantasy. This is its essential role.

The result of this motion is the emergence of that variety of truth which is not the opposite of falsehood. After all, if fantasy could tell the literal truth, it wouldn't need to be fantasy. It wouldn't even be fiction.

### Formal Logic in Pursuit of the Illogical

Logic of metaphor in a text is much more difficult to track down. But, paradoxically, for metaphor to seem logical, it must be all the more coherent because it is not literal.

Because a metaphor is "a figure of speech in which a name or a descriptive term is transferred to some object to which it is not properly applicable" (OED), the one usually linked to the other by the verb "to be," both equations and changes in mathematical notation can be seen as metaphorical. Although its metaphorical nature is a minimally important feature of much of mathematics, the very purpose and motivation of a branch of mathematics called category theory is to use intuitively apparent metaphors between mathematical genres in a manner rigorous enough to meet the standards of mathematical practice. That metaphor and category theory are aspects of the same endeavor is beautifully crystallized by Fitz-James O'Brien's story "What Was It?" in which the hero captures an invisible being who attacked him in his sleep and then makes a plaster cast of the being to see what it would look like were it not invisible. Both metaphor and category theory make the intuitively apparent (but obscure) obvious and communicable. The attempt of both metaphor and category theory is to create—out of fragmented intuitions—coherent thought.

Let us therefore apply logic in the form of mathematical analysis to the metaphorical structure of a dark fantasy, to explore the logic of the metaphorical. In Ramsey Campbell's "Where the Heart Is," a man sells his house after the death of his wife, only to find out that his mind and memory are integrally linked to the structure of the house. The new owners have undertaken a major remodeling project. As the house is remodeled, so is his mind. In the end, he chooses suicide and crawls into an obscure part of the house to die. The following analysis was reached through the use of category theory to relate the metaphorical and literal levels of the story. The objects and events of the story were set up as functors, morphisms, etc., and pages of equations were produced. The following is a summary of the conclusions.

In the case of the linkage between his mind and the structure of the house, the most obvious supernatural explanation is to attribute uncontrolled supernatural powers to the protagonist himself. And if he really did have a premonition, what kind of supernatural event was it? But the premonition of teddy bear wallpaper in the nursery belongs not so much to the protagonist, but to the house. If the house has paranormal abilities of any kind, this undermines the linkage between the house and the mind as either a manifestation of the protagonist's

(the real world) the woman/man did not stop reading/writing after all. So although the story itself ends tragically, the fact that the story exists implies that the tragedy has been overcome.

There are many conjugate pairs of images which imply their

delusional system or as evidence of the protagonist's possible paranormal abilities. One could interpret the entire problem as a manifestation of the protagonist's madness and leave it at that. However the precision with which the narrator tells his story and the sharp distinctions between the narrator's depression and this overt beat with base reality imply that perhaps the protagonist is to be trusted on this point. The house, though, has been our measure of the nature of reality throughout the story. The author gives us no other. The next best reality system in the story is the protagonist's view of reality, which we reject both because he is schizophrenic and suicidal and because it is little more helpful than the house as base reality.

The author has seduced the reader into feeling and believing that the story is a psychological metaphor horror story in which the reader can feel sorry for the narrator and secure in her own relationships to the nature of reality. Then, once the reader thinks she has her bearing as to what story this is, one detail undermines the certainty of reality, leaving the reader in the same relationship to reality as the poor and pitied protagonist. And the trap is sprung. The story becomes an Escheresque impossible object of which the unsettled reader must ask, "But how can it be like that?" The story's careful logic has been in pursuit of illogic. And from the logic of the story's illogic emerges the wonder of its horror.

The bulk of fantasy is not constructed in such a way as to be susceptible to the rigors of category theory. (Ramsey Campbell writes with enough precision enough that this story just happens to be.) But in this rare case that the rigors of formal logic can be fruitfully applied, we see that the emotional payoff—fantastic illogic—is or can be produced by the most meticulous of logics.

#### Logical Perversion

Fantasy's emotional subject matter is that which is on the edge of repression, what Julia Kristeva calls "the abject," hence the effect of the breach of consensual reality, the insistence upon taboo perspective. Kristeva's introduction of the concept of abjection sounds very like Rosemary Jackson's discussion of the irreducibility of the oxymoron in fantasy:

There looms, with abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the think-

able. It lies there quite close, but cannot be assimilated (Kristeva, p. 1).

Kristeva's discussion of the relation between abjection and law sounds very like what we have seen of the relation of fantasy to law:

The abject is related to perversion. The sense of abjection that I experience is anchored in the superego. The abject is perverse because it neither gives nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them (p. 15).

And, in fact, by nature, fantasy must corrupt consensual rules. We have seen how the rules of fantasy become part of the consensus, become the container in which we look for fantasy.

It becomes essential to the well-being of fantasy as an endeavor that the rules of fantasy be broken; that if stories must take place in Elfland and not in Poughkeepsie, that novels—such as Rachel Pollack's *Unquenchable Fire*—be set in a Poughkeepsie that is become Elfland. It becomes essential that if topology is used as a rationalizing force in order to "scientize" an otherwise wild and silly story such as Lafferty's "Narrow Valley," then stories such as "Inside Out" by Rudy Rucker—a story rejecting rationalized setting in order that it may talk about topology—must also be written.

On the one hand, then, we have fantasy the perverse, the agent of chaos whose horrific wonder leaves us asking questions such as, "but how can it be like that?", predicated upon the impossible pursued by logic, which logic is pursued by the irrational, which irrationality is pursued by realism, and on and on. Then on the other, we have fantasy, a fiction of rules. No cockney accents allowed, with built worlds, written in the high style, with characters who behave "logically," etc. And while some worlds have more of the one and less of the other, these are not two different kinds of fiction. Rather, they are two aspects of the same thing. The rules are the remnants of previous revolutions. ▶

*The author wishes to acknowledge the tolerance and assistance of her husband, Jim Young, who allowed her to bring her Mac along to Florida on their honeymoon in order that this essay be completed in time to be presented at the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts.*

### Equal Rites by Terry Pratchett

New York: Signet, 1988 (reprint of UK edition: 1987); \$3.50 pb; 254 pp.

reviewed by Greg Cox

Why is it that Terry Pratchett's fantasy spoofs, set in a magical Discworld located on the back of a giant space-travelling tortoise, strike me as so much funnier than the works of his American contemporaries, such as Robert Asprin and Craig Shaw Gardner? I've been meaning to launch a serious investigation into this matter ever since reading *Equal Rites* several months back—as soon as I found the time, you know? Well, I see there's already a new Discworld book, *Mort*, so I guess I'd better damn well do the quick-and-dirty version while I can. . . .

What makes Discworld a cut above Xanth and Myths and Netherlunds? Mere snobbish Anglophilia on my part? Nah, I haven't watched Masterpiece Theater in years, and besides, accents don't work in paperback.

The word "density" came to mind immediately, along with the vague impression, based on not-too-distant memories, that the Asprin and Gardner books consisted mostly of one-liners and funny dialogue—pages and pages of chatter—while Pratchett wrote lengthy, funny prose. Longer paragraphs, bigger words. . . my god, could it be that simple? If so, mere visual analysis should be enough to prove my case (and save me hours of actual rereading). Driven by burning curiosity and an impending deadline, I raced to bookshelf and pulled down copies of *Equal Rites*, *Myth-ing Persons*, and *A Malady of Magic*. Eagerly I scanned the pages, looking for damning concentrations of white space.

Alas, science is never so easy. The average page of all four books seemed to contain equal amounts of words in similar concentrations. So much for objective criteria! It was time to take plunge into a sea of subjectivity and start comparing the prose.

Bureka! It was a matter of density after all. Those lengthy paragraphs in the non-Pratchett parodies turn out to consist of rudimentary exposition and descriptions, i.e. just enough stage direction to get the plot from dialogue to dialogue. Pratchett's narration, however, is humorous in itself. Some may call this authorial intrusion, but I prefer to think that Pratchett-as-narrator has more jokes per page (and better lines) than all the bumbling wizards and apprentices in the other books. Judging from *Equal Rites*, Pratchett can no more write a paragraph without a punchline than I can end a review without making fair use of a gag:

"It was, in fact, one of those places that exist merely so that people can have come from them. The universe is littered with them: hidden villages, windswept little towns under wide skies, isolated cabins on chilly mountains, whose only mark on history is to be the incredibly ordinary place where something extraordinary started to happen. Often there is no more than a little plaque to reveal that, against all gynaeological probability, someone very famous was born halfway up a wall." ▶

# Work in Progress

A Bibliographic Checklist of First Editions, by L. W. Currey

Draft: Compiled 10/88

## ELIZABETH A. LYNN

b. 1946

THE DANCERS OF ARUN. *New York: Published by Berkley Publishing Corporation Distributed by G. P. Putnam's Sons, [1979].*

Boards with cloth shelf back. No statement of printing on copyright page.

A DIFFERENT LIGHT. *[New York: Published by Berkley Publishing Corporation, [1978].*

Wrappers. *Berkley Edition, August, 1978 on copyright page. A Berkley Book 0-425-03890-4 (\$1.75).*

ALSO: *London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1979.* Boards. No statement of printing on copyright page. First hardcover edition.

THE NORTHERN GIRL. *New York: Published by Berkley Publishing Corporation Distributed by G. P. Putnam's Sons, [1980].*

Boards. No statement of printing on copyright page.

THE RED HAWK. *New Castle: Cheap Street, [1983].*

177 copies printed. Two issues, no priority: (A) Quarter Niger goat and boards. 40 numbered and 4 lettered copies signed by Lynn and artist Alicia Austin. "Publisher's Edition." In cloth slipcase; this

issue not published in dust jacket. (B) Scarlet cloth, printed paper spine label. 127 numbered and 6 lettered copies signed by Lynn and Austin. "Collector's Edition." This issue has printed dust jacket; no slipcase. No statement of printing on copyright page.

THE SARDONYX NET. *New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, [1981].*

Boards. No statement of printing on copyright page.

THE SILVER HORSE. *[New York: Bluejay Books Inc., [1984].* Boards with cloth shelf back. *First Bluejay Printing: August 1984 on copyright page.*

WATCHTOWER. *New York: Published by Berkley Publishing Corporation Distributed by G. P. Putnam's Sons, [1979].* No statement of printing on copyright page.

THE WOMAN WHO LOVED THE MOON AND OTHER STORIES. *New York: Berkley Books, [1981].*

Wrappers. *Berkley edition/September 1981 on copyright page. Berkley Fantasy 0-425-05161-7 (\$2.95).*

Compiled 10/88

## JOAN SLONCZEWSKI

b.

A DOOR INTO OCEAN. *New York: Arbor House, [1986].*

Boards. First printing has code 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 on copyright page.

STILL FORMS ON FOXFIELD. *New York: Ballantine Books, [1980].*

Wrappers. *First Edition: April 1980 on copyright page. Ballantine 28762 (\$1.95).*

Note: This is part of a series of bibliographic checklists of SF and fantasy writers that will update, revise, and expand the standard reference work *Science Fiction and Fantasy Authors* by L. W. Currey. For the organizational principles and methodology used in this and future lists, please refer to the introduction to that work. Knowledgeable persons are invited to communicate addenda and corrigenda directly to L. W. Currey, Elizabethtown, NY 12932.

# Screed

(Letters of Comment)

John Foyster, Norwood, Australia

The April issue generated this immediate response because I had just finished reading Lewis Shiner's *Deserted Cities of the Heart* (thanks to Eileen Gunn and John D. Berry) when it arrived so that Greg Cox, in his review, was dealing with something I felt fresh about. Unfortunately, I can't say the same about Greg's review.

Through almost all the previous issues I've felt that your reviewers have been, all too often, writing about trivial books—the very ones you wrote about a few editorials ago when you wrote of the significance of the marketing business in sf nowadays. My reaction has been very much along the lines of "Is this really the best of that's being published nowadays?" (And then I look at the ads in *Locus* and think that maybe it is.)

But with this issue you have managed (at least in the back half) to put together a string of books by significant authors for review—Wolfe, Crowley, Jeter, Lafferty, and Shiner. And without having read the books in question, it looks as though, for the most part, your reviewers have risen to the occasion and done justice to the works being reviewed.

I'm less certain about Cox's review of Shiner, so perhaps my feelings about the other reviews are not sound. What strikes me about Cox's review is that to someone who has read *Deserted Cities of the Heart*—or at least this someone—the review doesn't seem to signify (if one of your Contributing Editors will allow me to sneak in an old-fashioned usage). In some ways it seems to be saying something

about the novel, but most of the time it's a string of ill-connected comments. (Of course it is true that one of the characteristics of Shiner's characters is that they are immensely judgmental about the world they inhabit—perhaps this is a consequence of the litigious nature of U.S.A. society—and so it would be appropriate for Cox to drop judgments casually as he goes.)

Some of those judgments are outrageously funny (such as the remark about Lucius Shepard writing the "Twilight Zone in El Salvador" stories), but because they are tritely so, not otherwise. Cox has done the right thing, however, because he has identified *Deserted Cities of the Heart* as a novel to worry about, and he does this well in the first few paragraphs; the last half of the review, when he gets to specifics, is what troubles me.

Detailed analysis of any significant novel requires more space than you seem to be able to allow (though the Crowley did manage two pages, fortunately) and, I think, Shiner's novel does deserve more consideration than this. I'm not arguing for extended academic analysis (for which there's no need—nor, in U.S.A., much demonstrated capacity), but rather for more space for your reviewers to get their teeth into the substance. (Even though I would argue that, for example, Lewis Shiner's novel differs only in trivial ways from Edmond Hamilton's space operas.) If you can give more space for worthwhile works to be reviewed and cut back on space given to reviews of shabby books (as Paul Preuss implies about his Augean labors) then you'll have taken one small step for fankind.

## Editorial

(Continued from page 24)

and doings. So what is this thing you hold in your hands that is neither fish nor fowl?

We are certainly part fanzine. Some of what we publish, like Susan Palwick's article on growing up with *Star Trek* fandom, clearly is derived from the fanzine form of personal journalism that fills most contemporary fanzines. Also, our design reflects Patrick Nielsen Hayden's experience with fanzines, and his opinions as to how one ought to look. And, of course, the magazine is produced by enthusiastic, idealistic volunteers for fun and adventure.

The title of the magazine gives away another of its origins. On a plane back from the Worldcon in New Orleans just after we launched the magazine, two tired people who had bought copies of *NYRSE* at the convention were discussing the magazine one row in front of Kathryn Cramer and kept referring to it as *The New York Review of Books*. We did indeed derive some fun from that anecdote, but the connection is only superficial. None of us on the *NYRSE* staff, nor anyone who has ever been on the staff, has ever been in on the publication of any of the major mainstream review magazines. Inasmuch as we imitate them, it is an imitation of form, rather than of technique. If there is one magazine whose short review technique we admire, it is *The Atlantic Review*. As for long reviews, or review essays, the *VIS* (*Voice Literary Supplement*), *The Bloomsbury Review*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post Book World* provide decent models. We only wish they devoted all that technique to the better books from our field more frequently.

Our techniques of editing essays and reviews, with their emphasis on precision of prose style and rigorous methodology rather than precision of length and adherence to house style, owe more to the editing of fiction than to the more journalistic editing that, say, Andy Porter employs. This arises both from our emphasis on in-depth reviewing of good books, and from various of our staff members' experience in academia and as fiction editors and anthologists. We assume, in addition, that the process of revision is normally a necessity with any piece of writing and that reviewers need encouragement to revise as much as any other writers; that publishing first drafts in a disservice both to writer and reader.

We in fact want to make a difference in how our readers perceive

individual works and more, how they perceive *sf* literature, how they perceive the *sf* field as a whole. As we grow and change with successive issues, it remains clear to us that there is much work to be done, and, happily, that we are not alone in our desires. The semi-professional press seems to us to have grown livelier in the last year or two, and not only in the U.S., with the advent of desktop publishing procedures potentially within the budget of individual fans. Our monthly schedule both deepens our impact and is our biggest handicap, a real time-eater. Our mix of reviews still leaves us unsatisfied, with too many deserving books unattended. We have had many wonderful articles promised us that have not been written, perhaps more than have been in our pages.

We are still growing, though, changing our procedures every month, working to build better for the future. Perhaps we'll get tired next year or the one after and decide to do something easier—but it doesn't seem likely to us now. This is too much fun.

When we started the magazine, we had all been members of the editorial board of a literary magazine for a varying number of years (2 to 23 years). In 1965 when that magazine was founded by Alexis Levin at Columbia University under the name *The Quest* (later, *The Little Magazine*), Alexis wrote a one-page manifesto setting forth the magazine's aesthetic program. We think Alexis would be pleased and surprised at the extent to which we still agree with such ringing sentences as "We expect of the artist not only a well-wrought structure, but, within it, a creative and meaningful reflection upon the essential truths of our existence as well." We maintained a sense of literary standards throughout the entire eccentric history of *The Little Magazine* and see no reason to reduce or compromise them for the supposed benefit of science fiction. In other words there is to be no Special Olympics for science fiction writers.

Tom Beele, one of the founding editors of *The Quest*, said years later, "I now see that I was attracted to this venture because I liked the way Alexis approached it—with not only great energy and enthusiasm, but also the conviction that what he did would make a difference and would last." It may perhaps appear quixotic but in fact we believe *The New York Review of Science Fiction* will make a difference and will last.

—David G. Hartwell, Kathryn Cramer & the Editors

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## Self-analysis:

### A Meditation Upon the Semi-prozine

*The New York Review of Science Fiction* is part of that tradition of the fanzine that includes *Cheap Truth*, pseudonymously published until its demise by Bruce Sterling, *Science Fiction Guide* (and its former incarnation, *The Patchin Review*) published by Charles Platt, and *SF Eye*, published by Steve Brown and Dan Steffan: American fanzines not merely about science fiction, but which also set out with the intention of influencing the sf literature.

Our recent nomination for the Hugo Award in the semi-prozine category provides occasion for us to consider again who we are and what we have done and are doing. The staff had dared to hope that we would be nominated next year (though not this year) for the Hugo, but expected that we would probably be in the fanzine category. That's what we thought we were, you see. Certainly, we run full-page ads from publishers. We pay small amounts to our contributors for their reviews and essays. Our magazine is professionally printed, rather than mimeoed. It did seem possible, though unlikely, that these three characteristics might catapult us into the semi-prozine category.

While we intend no slight to Andrew Porter's *Science Fiction Chronicle*, Charlie Brown's *Locus* is the quintessential semi-prozine. *Locus* took the affect of the fanish fanzine about the doings of fans and translated it into the isolated sphere of the sf "professionals," resulting in a magazine that serves somewhat the same function as a social register. But more importantly, *Locus* works very much on the model of *Publishers Weekly*, aspiring to be the trade journal of the science fiction field, attempting to give its readers an overview of *what's going on* in the field. Articles in both magazines tend to be about personalities and the business side of things and reviews are short, homogenous, and, at times, frustratingly shallow. No one we know reads either *Locus* or *Publishers Weekly* cover to cover but, like *The New York Times*, it's nice to know it's all there. The utility and importance of *Locus* is based upon the comprehensiveness of its coverage. Since our nomination, some of us have joked about buying enough *Locus* subscriptions to bump it up into the prozine category, but *Locus* is not our competition except, ironically, for the Hugo Award. Being in some sense the opposite of *Locus*, *NYRSF* is in fact a complementary publication to it.

What we didn't realize last year was that the definition of fanzine has mutated so far over the past decade or two that the trufans now do not recognize any publication that is for the most part about science fiction as a fanzine, no matter what the format. Real fanzines are about fans. Several of us have attended Corflus—the only remaining U.S. convention specifically for fanzine fans of the tru variety, founded because trufans have become increasingly isolated from the center of attention and activity in the sf field during the last two decades, and wished to maintain a proud and lonely togetherness—at which it has been starkly evident that real fanzines nowadays are almost never about sf, only about sf fans, their lives, thoughts,

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